

JESSE FRENCH PIANO AND ORGAN BUILDING  
(Starr Piano Company Building)  
240 5th Avenue North  
Nashville  
Davidson County  
Tennessee

HABS TN-263  
*HABS TN-263*

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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

## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

### JESSE FRENCH PIANO & ORGAN COMPANY BUILDING (Starr Piano Company Building)

HABS No. TN-263

Location: 240-42 5<sup>th</sup> Ave North, Nashville, Davidson County, Tennessee.

The coordinates for this building are 36.164387 N, -86.780739 W and they were obtained through Bing maps ([www.bing.com/maps/](http://www.bing.com/maps/)) on July 11, 2012. There is no restriction on the release of the locational data to the public.

Present Owner: Abraham and Farah Dabit, Charleston, South Carolina.

Present Use: The first floor is used by a business called “Fox’s Beauty Supply” which trades in hair attire and cosmetics. The second floor is used for storage. The two upper stories and the basement are vacant.

Significance: The Jesse French Piano & Organ Company Building was erected in ca. 1889-90. It is a four-story commercial brick construction, built broadly in a Queen Anne style, and has an elaborate sheet metal façade that is one the most ornate in downtown Nashville.

The original occupant of the building was the Jesse French Piano & Organ Company which had been founded in Nashville in the 1870s. Its eponymous owner was a canny and musically-inclined businessman whose firm flourished in the latter part of the nineteenth century by meeting the growing demand for pianos. During that era, a piano embodied respectability, civility and the “cultural refinement associated with England’s Victorian lifestyle” and was therefore a common feature of middle-class American parlors.<sup>1</sup> As a result, French’s company, which sold several brands of pianos and organs, grew rapidly and established retail outlets in a number of major cities across the South.

The Jesse French Piano and Organ Co building was located in the heart of Nashville’s downtown area in a street frequented by middle- and upper-class women. The scale of the structure, the attention to design detail both on its interior and exterior, and the fact that it was built with elevators in place, all serve as an expression of the firm’s expansion and confidence at the time of construction.

Historian: Rachel Hopkin, Sally Kress Tompkins Fellow, 2012

#### PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

##### A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: ca. 1889-90
2. Architect: Unknown

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<sup>1</sup> Rick Kennedy, *Jelly Roll, Bix and Hoagy: Gennett Studios and the Birth of Recorded Jazz* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 5.

2. Architect: Unknown

3. Original and subsequent owners, occupants, uses:

Owners:

April 10, 1889 - November 7, 1910:	Jesse French Piano & Organ Company <sup>2</sup>
November 7, 1910 - October 4, 1937:	Henry Gennett (and the trustees of his estate) <sup>3</sup>
October 4, 1937 - October 16, 1981:	Rose Gennett Martin <sup>4</sup>
October 16, 1981 - January 19, 1996:	Rose Gennett Martin, Alice M. Karlebach, and Henry G. Martin <sup>5</sup>
January 19, 1996 - March 4, 2005:	Farah Dabit and Hanna Anki <sup>6</sup>
March 4, 2005 - Present:	Abraham Dabit and Farah Dabit

Main Occupants:

From time of construction - 1910:	Jesse French Piano & Organ Company
1910 until ca. 1929:	Starr Piano Company
ca. 1930s and 1940s:	Several shoe stores, including the College Slipper Shop and Manufacturers Outlet Shoe Store
1931 until 1937:	Michael F Shea Pianos <sup>7</sup>
ca. 1940 until ca. 1991:	Banks Clothing Store (along with Jo Ann's Beauty Salon during the 1960s and 70s)
Late 1990s:	One Price Clothing Store
2009 until present:	Fox's Beauty Supply

4. Builder, contractor, suppliers: Unknown

5. Original plans and construction: The original drawings have not been found. However, an 1892 Nashville guide book shows a rendering of the building's front façade which may have been based on the original architect's plan (Figure 1).<sup>8</sup> In the illustration, the building has five stories, rather than the actual four that were built, and it towers over its neighbors. This drawing may therefore represent an "enhanced" version of the architect's intended scheme, as it was not uncommon for such embellished reproductions to be featured in booster publications of that era.

The drawing shows an imposing structure that includes a mostly glass storefront with a centrally-placed entrance, and upper stories dominated by rows of windows. There are prominent decorative features at all levels of the building and these culminate in an ornate cornice with dentils which is topped by an oversized parapet emerging above the roofline. The parapet includes a modified central antefix featuring a motif similar in shape to the Greek symbol for

<sup>2</sup> Register of Deeds, Davidson County, Tennessee. Book 121, Page 522.

<sup>3</sup> Register of Deeds, Davidson County, Tennessee. Book 388, Page 736.

<sup>4</sup> Register of Deeds, Davidson County, Tennessee. Book 1027, Page 602.

<sup>5</sup> Register of Deeds, Davidson County, Tennessee. Book 5809, Pages 271-288.

<sup>6</sup> Register of Deeds, Davidson County, Tennessee. Book 9922, Pages 859-863.

<sup>7</sup> Contemporary city directories indicate that during the 1930s, the building was occupied by more than one business at a time, hence the Michael F. Shea piano business appears to have been resident at the same time as one or other of the shoe stores.

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Morrison, *The Engelhardt Series: American Cities - The City of Nashville* (St Louis, MO: Geo. W. Engelhardt, 1892), 120.

Omega, as well as pinnacles at either end. The words “Jesse French Piano & Organ Co” are conspicuously displayed above the storefront level and below the level of the roofline.

Assuming that the illustration was indeed based on the architect’s original plan, albeit an amplified version of that plan, comparison of the drawing with a photograph taken in ca. 1900 and with visual inspection of the building today indicates that there was a high degree of correspondence between the building as conceived and the one as built. Aside from the extra floor, the only notable difference is that the central Omega-like motif in the drawing became a circular sunburst motif in the actual building.

6. Alterations and additions: Based on physical and photographic evidence, the building retains much of its original form although alterations have taken place. Some of these are indicated by a photograph taken in about 1900 (Figure 2). It shows a view of the front (west) façade and a partial view of the upper part of the north elevation.<sup>9</sup> In the photograph, the ground floor storefront is shown to have had a large central doorway, which was recessed beneath a clerestory. Two stone pilasters with capitals stood either side of this entrance. This doorway stood in the center of a symmetrical glass and wood storefront, and each side of the entrance there was a single large pane of glass beneath a clerestory. At either end of the storefront, there were rusticated stone pilasters. The top of the storefront was clearly defined by a protruding belt course. Only the rusticated stone pilasters remain and the ground level façade has been completely altered into a modern steel and glass storefront, with an entrance near the south corner.

The ca. 1900 photograph also shows that on the three stories above storefront level, there were originally three bays of windows on the front façade and that in the two bays either side of the central ones, there were two large single-pane windows with movable transoms above. In the central bays, there were three single-pane windows. Today there are three double-hung wood-sash windows in every bay. Other changes that have taken place, as indicated by the photograph, concern decorative features removed from the exterior, such as the pinnacles formerly at each corner of the cornice.

An interior photograph taken around 1896 shows a view of one of the floors of the Jesse French Piano and Organ Co. building (Figure 3).<sup>10</sup> Based on the view of the columns, it seems most likely that it is the second floor and the original single pane windows with transoms can be seen on the rear (east) wall. Another photograph featured in a 1900 trade publication appears to show the ground floor with the same windows at the rear wall. Today there are no windows present in the rear walls at any level and the openings have been bricked in.

The ground floor interior has been completely renovated with modern retail fixtures. The second floor interior was altered, probably during the mid-twentieth century, to function as a clothing retail store. For example, there are fixtures in place to hang and display clothing as well as partitions for changing rooms. The upper two stories appear to be relatively intact with historic finishes and materials.

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<sup>9</sup> “5th Avenue between Church Street and Union Avenue shows the Jesse French Piano Company and the Camp Sewing Machine Company.” Photographer: Calvert. Image ID 3610, Negative 568, File Location: Drawer 18, Folder 123, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Accessed via <http://tnsos.org/tsla/imagesearch/citation.php?ImageID=3610> August 12, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> Photograph by Otto Giers, reproduced under the title “Warerooms, Jesse French Piano and Organ Company” in the *Centennial Album – Nashville, Tennessee* (J Prousnitzer and Company, 1896).

## B. Historical Context:

The Jesse French Piano & Organ Company building is likely to have been built in or around 1889 or 1890. The evidence for this supposition comes from a number of sources. The 1888 *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map* shows that the lot was occupied by a three-story building with two separate storefronts standing at 240 and 242 respectively.<sup>11</sup> An 1889 city atlas of Nashville indicates that same three-story building was still in place.<sup>12</sup> However, in 1892, an illustration and description of the Jesse French Piano & Organ Company building appeared in Andrew Morrison's *The City of Nashville*.<sup>13</sup> The Jesse French Piano & Organ Company must therefore have been constructed at some point between 1889 and 1892.

The Nashville city directories show that in 1889, the Jesse French Piano & Organ Company was located at 237 North Summer Street.<sup>14</sup> North Summer Street was the original name for 5<sup>th</sup> Ave North so this would have been across the street from the building in question. However, by 1890 the company had moved into 240 North Summer, i.e. the building under consideration.<sup>15</sup>

Turning to the records in the Davidson County Register of Deeds, these show that the property was transferred to the Jesse French Piano & Organ Company in April 1889 and that the previous owners were John Lumsden and his wife. John Lumsden was Jesse French's father-in-law and the two men collaborated on various business enterprises so the exchange of deeds is not necessarily conclusive. However, taking into account the information provided by the maps, the city directories and the 1892 description in *The City of Nashville*, it seems likely that Jesse French Piano & Organ Company building was constructed around the time that the exchange of deeds took place in 1889.

The original architect has not been identified, but the building, once erected, was a striking one. In his account, the aforementioned Andrew Morrison was moved to describe it as having perhaps:

...the handsomest front in Nashville. It is all iron, steel and plate glass, and the largest sheets of plate glass yet put up in Nashville are in this front. This building is five stories high, and has a basement; its floors have an area of 15,750 square feet; it is finished in hard woods; has elevators and all modern improvements.<sup>16</sup>

The description sits alongside a drawing of the building - however both the illustration and Morrison's description are somewhat faulty since they each suggest a five-story structure, whereas in fact the Jesse French Piano & Organ Company building had only four. It is possible the original design was reduced in height while the rendering continued to circulate. Even with only four stories, the Jesse French Piano & Organ Company building had been designed to impress, and the inclusion of the elevators and "modern improvements" mentioned by Morrison indicate that the business that occupied them was in expansive and optimistic mode.

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<sup>11</sup> *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map*, Nashville, TN, (1888), Sheet 3. An illustration of North Summer Street circa mid-1880s book shows a substantial three-story building occupying the lot where the Jesse French Piano & Organ Company building stands. See John Cornman, ed. *Nashville: An Illustrated Review of Its Progress and Importance* (Enterprise Publishing Company, [c. 1885]), 17.

<sup>12</sup> *Atlas of the City of Nashville Tennessee* (Philadelphia: G. M. Hopkins, 1889), Plate 2

<sup>13</sup> Morrison, 120.

<sup>14</sup> *Nashville City Directory* (Nashville, Tennessee: Marshall and Bruce, 1889), 304.

<sup>15</sup> *Nashville City Directory* (1890), 314.

<sup>16</sup> Morrison, 120.

Jesse French, the man behind the company bearing his name, was born in Devonshire, England in 1846. He moved to the United States with his parents a few years later, and the family settled in Nashville when the boy was ten years old.<sup>17</sup> French's early career included clerking for the Secretary of State of Tennessee (and he later served as the Assistant Secretary of State for some years), working for the local *Republican Banner* newspaper, and supplying leather to the Confederate army during the Civil War.<sup>18</sup> However, when it came to "recreation and inspiration" French turned to music.<sup>19</sup> He played, for example, within a five-piece salon ensemble.<sup>20</sup> By the time he was in his late twenties his interest in music also began to affect his working life, for he purchased the sheet music department of the Nashville company, Dorman & Holmes, and also became a part owner of a local piano company, Dorman, French and Smith.<sup>21</sup> When he later bought out his two partners, the Jesse French Piano & Organ Company was born.

The city of its birth, Nashville, was one that prided itself on its educated and cultured middle class. Within a few decades of its founding in 1779, Nashvillians were already displaying an appetite for cultural activities, particularly those related to music. For example, in 1820, at which point the city only had around three thousand residents, J. H. Taylor, originally of London, was manufacturing pianos in the city. Ten years later, a James Ackroyd set up a shop south of the Public Square and was advertising pianos shipped in by steamboat, and also selling violins and other instruments. In the early-1850s, the city's residents could buy pianos from James Diggons at 30 Union Street, L. Gitter and Co. at 14 South Vine Street (7<sup>th</sup> Ave), E. Morton at 33 Union Street, his next-door neighbor H. Reed at 31 Union Street, or John Wert, a few doors along at 43 Union Street.<sup>22</sup> The collective presence of all these dealers was such that on May 26, 1854, a report appeared in the *Republican Banner* that noted "We have heard the opinion expressed that there were, probably, more pianos in Nashville than in any place of its population in the United States."<sup>23</sup>

While some of these musical businesses folded during the Civil War, others soon rose up to take their place. During the latter half of the nineteenth century, pianos increasingly became seen as emblems of respectability, civility and the "cultural refinement associated with England's Victorian lifestyle."<sup>24</sup> A piano was therefore a common feature of American middle class parlors and contemporary photographs often show them prominently placed within elaborately decorated rooms.

It was amid this favorable climate that Jesse French established his business. Prior to taking up residence within the purpose-built Jesse French Piano & Organ Company building, the company had moved around a fair bit within city. It started out at 85-87 Church Street, then moved one block north to 161 Union Street, and it also spent time in a couple of other locations on Summer Street.<sup>25</sup> It also seems to have spent a short period in the Nashville Masonic Temple (located on Church between Summer and Cherry Streets) according to an ad in an 1880 Nashville guide book:

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<sup>17</sup> "Jesse French, Sr., dies at New Castle," *Presto Times: the American Music Trade Weekly* (14 May 1927): 1.

<sup>18</sup> "Jesse French, Sr., dies at New Castle," 1; Kay Beasley, "Nashville Past: French family's music plays a century later," *Nashville Banner*, 9 September 1991, n.p..

<sup>19</sup> "Jesse French, Sr., dies at New Castle," 1.

<sup>20</sup> Beasley.

<sup>21</sup> "Jesse French Notes Progress of Nashville," *Presto Times: the American Music Trade Weekly* (5 April 1924): 5.

<sup>22</sup> Martha Rivers Ingram and D. B. Kellogg, *Apollo's Struggle: A Performing Arts Odyssey In The Athens Of The South, Nashville, Tennessee* (Franklin, Tennessee: Hillsboro Press, 2004), 12.

<sup>23</sup> "The Italian Opera," *Republican Banner*, 26 May 1854, 3.

<sup>24</sup> Kennedy, 5.

<sup>25</sup> In 1887, the Jesse French Piano and Organ Co was listed at 443 South Summer Street. In 1888 and 1889, it was at 237 North Summer. See *Nashville City Directory* (Nashville, Tennessee: Marshall and Bruce, 1887), 256; *Nashville City Directory* (1888), 298; *Nashville City Directory* (1889), 304.

Music Emporium! Pianos and Organs!!

Jesse French

Masonic Temple Nashville, Tennessee

Agent of the World-Renowned WEBER, CHASE, HAINES BROS., GROVESTEEEN & FULLER and  
other

PIANOS

Also Sole Agent for the unrivaled ESTEY, NEW HAVEN, and other first-class

ORGANS

At lowest Prices. I can furnish a nice 7-octave Piano for \$200, and a fine Organ for \$65. Instruments sent on trial, and satisfaction guaranteed. Sheet music and small musical merchandise at popular prices.<sup>26</sup>

Sheet music sales were an important part of the Jesse French Piano & Organ Company business model. French had recognized early on that sheet music and piano sales were interdependent, with the former helping to move the latter.<sup>27</sup> His company dealt in both and accordingly grew quickly. It was incorporated in St Louis, Missouri in 1887, and by the time the 5th Avenue North building was constructed, the firm was one of the largest piano companies in the South, with other branches in St Louis, Little Rock, Birmingham, and Memphis. In addition, the company had half a million dollars worth of mortgage-free capital assets as well as seventy-five employees and thirty-five salesmen.<sup>28</sup>

Since the company had headquarters in Nashville (as well as in St Louis), it seems likely that the newly built store on North Summer Street was to be a flagship outlet. The area in which it was located was the shopping and retail center of the city and this particular stretch of the street was dominated by businesses catering to middle- and upper-class women who would go there to buy clothes, shoes, sewing supplies, and household goods.<sup>29</sup> By way of illustration, a contemporary Nashville city directory indicates that on the 200 block of North Summer, there were at least four different dressmakers, four shops selling “fancy goods,” two offering “ladies furnishings,” two more supplying hair goods, and one hairdresser.<sup>30</sup> The 1888 *Sanborn Map*, meanwhile, shows that there was also a sewing machine repair shop on the block.<sup>31</sup> The clientele attracted by such businesses would have considered the ability to play the piano a desirable accomplishment and the Jesse French Piano & Organ Company was not alone in choosing the neighborhood for the location of a piano store. At the time that it moved into the new building, several other piano vendors - R. L. Loud, D. H. Baldwin and Company, and R. Dorman and Company - were all in close proximity, either on the same block of North Summer, or around the corner on Church Street.<sup>32</sup>

The architect of the Jesse French Piano & Organ Company building chose to draw on the Queen Anne style, then popular in domestic architecture, for the design for the structure. The Queen Anne-inspired decorative features included classical columns and a decorative parapet on the exterior, and

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<sup>26</sup> Charles Edwin Robert, ed., *Nashville City Guide Book* (Nashville, Tennessee: Wheeler Brothers, 1880), 65. This stint at the Masonic Temple is not recorded in the city directories. Cherry Street was later renamed 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue.

<sup>27</sup> David Joyner, “The French Connection: The Jesse French Piano Company’s Impact on the Development of Mississippi Valley Ragtime” (Paper presented at the National Meeting of the College Music Society, St Louis, Missouri, 12 October 1989).

<sup>28</sup> Morrison, 120.

<sup>29</sup> Philip Thomason, *National Register of Historic Places – Nomination Form: Fifth Avenue Historic District, Nashville, TN* (United States Department of the Interior: National Park Service, 1983).

<sup>30</sup> *Nashville City Directory* (1891), 999, 1002, 1011, and 1023.

<sup>31</sup> *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, Nashville, TN*, (1888), Sheet 3.

<sup>32</sup> R. L. Loud was at 212 North Summer, D. H. Baldwin was at 517 Church, and R Dorman at 533 Church. See *Nashville City Directory* (1890), 920.

spindle-work balustrades and Eastlake doorknobs on the interior. Assuming the intended primary market was female, the decision to use this style may have been strategic and aimed at attracting women to the store and making them feel comfortable once inside.

Once open, the pianos on sale at the Jesse French Piano & Organ Company store included models made by Steinway, Chickering, Weber, Chase, Haines Brothers, Grovesteen and Fuller, Story and Clark, Mason and Hamlin, Packard, New England, and Hardman.<sup>33</sup> In addition there were organs from Estey, New Haven, and other companies. Around two hundred instruments were kept in stock. A ca. 1896 photograph of the store interior (probably second floor) shows an open room with an array of upright and grand pianos and at least one organ.<sup>34</sup>

The building was not used simply for retail activities; from 1894 it was also home to twice-weekly meetings of the Jesse French Orchestral Society of Nashville.<sup>35</sup> This amateur orchestra met on Tuesday and Friday nights with a Professor William Thomas as concertmaster and a Professor W. L. Eiseman as conductor. The fact that Jesse French set up such a society, despite the fact that the use of pianos within orchestras is limited, is a further indication that he had a genuine interest in music for its own sake, rather than simply as a business opportunity. In addition, there are a number of small rooms on the two upper stories which appear to date from the time the building was erected or soon after. It is possible these spaces were used for music lessons. While 1892 city directory has one entry for a music teacher at the address, by 1910 eleven different teachers listed the building as their place of work.<sup>36</sup>

Aside from offering a retail and practice venue for musical instruments, Jesse French and his Nashville store played an important role in the development of the ragtime music scene during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. According to the musicologist David Joyner, French was a key figure in the development of the Southern ragtime despite the fact that he did not publish ragtime music himself. Instead, it was his enthusiastic support of those who did, as well as ragtime composers, which made an impact. French appears to have used his network of stores, including the Nashville branch, to promote and distribute piano rags. For example, within Nashville, he seems to have actively encouraged both his brother Henry A. French and his friend O. K. Houck to publish ragtime pieces. Henry French's publications included a number of works by Nashville's most significant ragtime composer, Charles Hunter, including "Possums and Taters," "A Tennessee Tantalizer," and "Queen of Love." Hunter also worked for some years in the Jesse French Piano & Organ Company building as a piano tuner. French's promotion of ragtime music would not have indicated a move away from the hitherto female clientele at the Jesse French Piano & Organ Company store. Although many well-known ragtime performers were African American men, the target consumer of many of the white publishers of ragtime music was the young white middle class lady pianist "anxious to find a lively alternative to the dreary technical exercises and sonatinas she was forced to practice."<sup>37</sup>

In 1900, the *Music Trade Review* publication devoted a spread - consisting of an article and a large illustration - to the Jesse French Piano & Organ Company's Nashville store.<sup>38</sup> The illustration incorporated photographs of both the interior and exterior of the store along with headshots of the twenty-

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<sup>33</sup> Tim Sharp, *Images of America: Nashville Music Before Country* (Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2008), 110; Ingram and Kellogg, 13; *Nashville City Directory* (1895), 422.

<sup>34</sup> "Warerooms, Jesse French Piano and Organ Company," *Centennial Album - Nashville, Tennessee*, n.p..

<sup>35</sup> Ingram and Kellogg, 13.

<sup>36</sup> *Nashville City Directory* (1892), 1059; *Nashville City Directory* (Nashville, Tennessee: Marshall-Bruce-Poke, 1910), 1063.

<sup>37</sup> David Joyner, *Southern Ragtime and its Transition to Published Blues* (Ph.D Diss., Graduate School of Memphis State University, August 1986), 61.

<sup>38</sup> "The Jesse French Branch at Nashville," *The Music Trade Review* (31 January 1900): 30.

six employees working there, many of them salesmen (see Figure 3). The article, which appears to have been prompted by the recent appointment of Claude P. Street as store manager, described the company as “among the largest distributors of musical merchandise in the world” and with branches throughout the South that were all “under the management of men who have made excellent business records.”<sup>39</sup>

The years straddling the turn of the twentieth century were ones of change for Jesse French and his company. In 1897 he moved to St Louis where his firm had a second headquarters as well as a retail outlet.<sup>40</sup> In 1910, the deed of the Jesse French Piano & Organ Company building in Nashville was transferred to Henry Gennett, who was actually French’s brother-in-law, and by 1911 it was listed in the city directory as being the home of the Starr Piano Company. A photograph taken around that time shows that the words “Starr Piano Starr” had replaced the “Jesse French Pianos & Organs” in the frieze just below the roof line (Figure 4).<sup>41</sup> Behind these events lay a complex web of dynastic business deals and company mergers in which John Lumsden, Jesse French’s father-in-law and the previous owner of the land on which Jesse French Piano & Organ Company stands, emerges as a pivotal figure.

John Lumsden had been born in England in 1824, taken up residence in the U.S in 1842, and fathered three daughters: Caroline, who married Jesse French in 1872, Alice, who married Henry Gennett in 1876 and Maria, who married Oscar Addison Field in 1882. French and Field entered into business together in 1883 as Field, French and Company, then the Field-French Piano Company. Both Field and Lumsden were involved with the Jesse French Piano & Organ Company and it is probably no coincidence that when the company incorporated in 1887, it did so in St Louis, the city where Field lived.<sup>42</sup>

As the Jesse French Piano & Organ Company grew, it was decided that the business would do well to sell a line of pianos under its own name. To help turn this idea into a reality, executives reached out to an Indiana-based piano manufacturing firm called the Starr Piano Company, whose instruments were already being sold via the Jesse French Piano & Organ Company chain of stores. The negotiations resulted in the Jesse French Piano & Organ Company taking over the controlling interest in the Starr Company in 1893.<sup>43</sup> Benjamin Starr was president, and John Lumsden and Henry Gennett became secretary/treasurer. Jesse French joined them on the board of the company and was a director for several years but did not actively participate in the Starr Piano business.<sup>44</sup> The merger proved to be a success and soon the Starr Piano Company’s factory was producing six thousand pianos a year, with many of them going on to be sold via the retail outlets already put in place by French. Even so, Lumsden was not keen on French’s tendency towards aggressive markups. In a revealing letter he sent to Gennett, he wrote:

We have in the store a good stock of cheap pianos (...) Mozarts cost \$83, Waverlys \$100, Majestics \$100, so you can see we have a house full of trash. And these pianos are priced from \$250 to \$350. The better grades only come in when these can’t be forced off. I want to give you the facts so that you may see the drift of the business.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> *Nashville City Directory* (1905), 456.

<sup>40</sup> *Nashville City Directory* (1897), 419.

<sup>41</sup> “East side of 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue between the Arcade and Union Street; show the Starr Piano Company.” Photographer: Calvert. Image ID 3618, Negative 1000, File Location: Drawer 18, Folder 113A, Tennessee State Library and Archives. Accessed via <http://tnsos.org/tsla/imagesearch/citation.php?ImageID=3618> August 12, 2012.

<sup>42</sup> David Joyner, “The French Connection: The Jesse French Piano Company’s Impact on the Development of Mississippi Valley Ragtime” Laurel Martin, “Lumsden-Gennett-French and Field History 1853-1905,” unpublished. The 1889 and 1890 *Nashville City Directory* listings for the Jesse French Piano and Organ Co show “O. A. Fields” as secretary and treasurer. See *Nashville City Directory* (1889), 304; (1890), 314.

<sup>43</sup> Joyner, “The French Connection,” 1989.

<sup>44</sup> Kennedy, 7.

<sup>45</sup> Quoted in Kennedy, 6-7.

Lumsden died in 1898 and following his passing, Jesse French and Oscar Field got into a legal wrangle over the acquisition of his stock. The outcome is unclear but by 1902 Field and Gennett had bought out French's part in both the Starr Piano Company and the Jesse French Piano & Organ Company.<sup>46</sup> Benjamin Starr died in 1903, at which point, Henry Gennett became president of the Starr Piano Company.<sup>47</sup>

Given that Gennett and Field had bought out the Jesse French Piano & Organ Company in 1902, they presumably took control of the Jesse French Piano & Organ Company building in Nashville at that point. This supposition is given substance by the deed record of 1910, which shows that the building was put in the name of Henry Gennett alone for a nominal dollar.<sup>48</sup> By 1915, there were also Starr Piano Company stores in Detroit, Chicago, San Diego, Los Angeles, and major cities throughout Ohio and Indiana, and these were in addition the string of shops that still bore the Jesse French name.<sup>49</sup> This formidable distribution network enabled the Starr Company to become a major force in piano manufacturing and sales; indeed it was one of the largest such enterprises in the U.S. The company produced a wide range of pianos including player pianos, and also fabricated pianos that bore the brand names of other companies.

In 1915, the Starr Company began to diversify into making and selling records and phonographs, which in time would take over from the sheet music sales that had helped to make the Jesse French Piano & Organ Company such a success. Henry Gennett's enthusiasm for the new medium of sound recording led the company to start producing Starr brand phonograph players and also to establish a recording division with studios in New York and Indiana, as well as a record pressing plant in Indiana. The records and equipment Starr produced were sold throughout the Starr/French distribution network at a time when phonographs were becoming desirable objects for the middle classes (rather as pianos had been several decades earlier).<sup>50</sup> The Starr Label was renamed Gennett Records and went on to make pioneering jazz recordings of such artists as Jelly Roll Morton, Louis Armstrong, and Bix Beiderbecke.<sup>51</sup> The Nashville Starr Piano Company Store sold both these records and the equipment on which to play them for as long as it remained at 240-242 5th Ave North. Advertisements from that time indicate the importance of the new recording section to the retail business. For example, in one ad in the 1924 Nashville city directory, the words "STARR Phonograph" are prominently displayed alongside the "Grand, Upright, Player Pianos." A few pages later, another ad reads:

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<sup>46</sup> French went on to form the Jesse French and Sons Piano & Organ Company and had also gone into partnership with an Albert Krell to launch the Krell French Piano Company which manufactured pianos. See "The French Connection," 1989. French continued to operate in the retail business using his own name. In the late 1970s, there was still a Jesse French Music Co. in Mobile, Alabama operated by Jesse French III. The store and the Jesse French name were subsequently sold to French Forbes Jr. of the E.E. Forbes & Son Piano Company, Birmingham, Alabama. See Beasley.

<sup>47</sup> Joyner, "The French Connection."

<sup>48</sup> Register of Deeds, Davidson County, Tennessee. Book 388, Page 736.

<sup>49</sup> Kennedy, 10.

<sup>50</sup> Kennedy, 22. Initially the records the Starr company produced were in a vertical disc format that could only be played on Starr machines. When the company decided to make lateral discs that could be used on the best selling Victor and Columbia gramophone machines, Victor responded with a lawsuit. Starr triumphed in court by arguing that the lateral disc technology was in the public domain and thereby brought about a recording revolution. Many new record labels formed knowing that they would now be able to release discs that could be played on the leading brand equipment. The resulting competition led to improved recording technology and reduced record prices.

<sup>51</sup> "Why the Difference Was in the Tone: The Output of the Gennett Label," Accessed via <http://starrgennett.org/stories/history/3.htm> 13 August 2012.

THE STARR PIANO CO.  
Manufacturers of the Celebrated  
Starr Phonograph and Gennett Records  
“The Difference is in the Tone”  
Plays All Disc Records.<sup>52</sup>

In addition to its line in jazz recordings, the Starr Company also released over three hundred country music records between 1925 and 1934 on its Champion label, featuring artists such as Gene Autry, Bradley Kincaid, Uncle Dave Macon, and Ernest Stoneman.<sup>53</sup> Coincidentally, many of the country music stars captured on Champion also spent a good deal of their time performing close to the Starr Piano Company’s Nashville building, thanks to their appearances on the *Grand Ole Opry*. The *Grand Ole Opry* was a barn-dance style show launched in 1925 by the Nashville radio station WSM. A few years later, WSM became a clear channel station and the *Opry* could be heard across most of America and parts of Canada and its success made Nashville something of a Mecca for country music performers.

During the early twenties, America was enjoying a post World War I boom and the market for pianos and phonographs was strong. Starr Company recordings were being sold by the millions through the Starr/French chain of stores.<sup>54</sup> However while the advent of recording technology was good in some way for the Starr Company, it also led, in 1923, to the production of cheap radios and these began to impinge on the piano trade. Between 1923 and 1929, production of pianos in the U.S. fell by half.<sup>55</sup> The 1929 stock market crash also hit the Starr Piano Company hard. In the ensuing years, the recording division folded and the company began to diversify, moving into the refrigerator market during the 1930s and abandoning pianos completely in the early 1950s.<sup>56</sup> However the Nashville store had long since closed -- 1929 was the last year that that the Starr Piano Company was listed in the city directory at 240-242 5<sup>th</sup> Ave North.<sup>57</sup>

After the Starr Piano Company vacated the premises, the Jesse French Piano and Organ Company Building was only associated with one more piano dealer, namely Michael F. Shea Pianos, which was listed in the city directories as being the occupant of 242 5<sup>th</sup> Ave North from 1931 through to 1937.<sup>58</sup> The directories from the 1930s also show several shoe stores, including the College Slipper Shop and the Manufacturers Outlet Shoe Store, resident in the building although it is not clear how these concerns would have operated side by side with Michael F. Shea Pianos. It could be that one operated at the storefront level and the other occupied an upper floor or floors, or it is possible that the storefront level was divided in two but that the evidence of this division no longer remains.

In 1940 Banks Women Clothes was listed as a resident of the building for the first time.<sup>59</sup> The Banks Company would go on to occupy the building for over fifty years, though it functioned under

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<sup>52</sup> Nashville City Directory (Nashville TN: Marshall Bruce Poke Company, 1925), 96, 102.

<sup>53</sup> “The Cradle of Recorded Jazz...and the Blues...and Country?”. Accessed via <http://stargennett.org/stories/history/4.htm> August 13, 2012.

<sup>54</sup> Kennedy, 28.

<sup>55</sup> Kennedy, 44.

<sup>56</sup> “The Lead Out: The Starr Piano Company’s Demise.” Accessed via <http://stargennett.org/stories/history/5.htm> 13 August 2012. “Refrigerators will be made by Local Company,” *Richmond Palladium Item*, 14 January 1931, 2.

<sup>57</sup> *Nashville City Directory* (1911), 384; *Nashville City Directory* (1914), 947; *Nashville City Directory* (New York: Marshall Bruce Poke Company, 1920-21), 541; *Polk’s Nashville City Directory* (Nashville, Tennessee: R.L. Polk and Co, 1929), 1039.

<sup>58</sup> *Polk’s Nashville City Directory* (1931), 1306; *Polk’s Nashville City Directory* (1937), 1009.

<sup>59</sup> *Polk’s Nashville City Directory* (1940), 1222.

various names over that time, including “Banks Olshine Stores Inc Banks Clothing” and “Banks Credit Clothing.”<sup>60</sup> Evidence of the Banks’ tenancy remains today. There are, for example, a number of fixtures in place on the second floor interior that would have served to hang and display clothing as well as partitions for changing rooms. During the 1960s and 1970s, “Jo Ann’s Beauty Salon” was also listed at the address and presumably this was an in-store concession. The final year that the Banks Company was in the building, according to city directories, was 1991.

At the time that the Banks Company vacated the building, the downtown area of Nashville had been in a state of decline for some years. In a situation familiar across much of America, the construction of malls on the outskirts of the city had a marked impact on its hitherto central commercial district.<sup>61</sup> In Nashville the development of the Green Hills Mall in 1955, 100 Oaks in 1967, the Harding Mall in 1968, the Rivergate Mall in 1971 and Hickory Hollow in 1978 had a combined and negative impact on the city’s once bustling downtown.<sup>62</sup> This impact was exacerbated in 1974 when the *Grand Ole Opry*, which had been broadcast from the nearby Ryman Auditorium since 1943 and drawn musicians, tourists and fans to the area, moved to a new complex in the northeast part of the city.<sup>63</sup>

Although a downtown revitalization program begun in the 1980s sought to reverse the downward drift of the downtown area, the Jesse French Piano and Organ Co building was vacant for a number of years during the 1990s and 2000s (although it was briefly occupied by the “One Price Clothing Store” in the late 1990s).<sup>64</sup> At some point during these years, a storm caused damage to some of the windows in the upper two stories. The resulting breakages have since been repaired but evidence of both water damage on the interior, and of occupation by pigeons (in the form of droppings and carcasses) remains. Since 2009, 240-242 5th Ave North has been the home of “Fox’s Beauty Supply,” which uses the ground floor for its retail operation and the second floor for storage. The upper two stories and the basement are vacant.

## PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

### A. General Statement

1. Architectural character: The French Building is a late-nineteenth century brick commercial structure with an elaborate sheet metal façade and Queen Anne decorative features. It consists of four stories and a basement (Figure 5).
2. Condition of fabric: Fair. The building has evidence of water and animal infiltration on the upper floors. The lower floors are well maintained and in use.

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<sup>60</sup> *Polk’s Nashville City Directory* (1950), 1061; *Polk’s Nashville City Directory Street and Avenue Guide* (St Louis, MO: R.L. Polk and Co, 1959-60), 18; *Polk’s Nashville City Directory Street and Avenue Guide* (1970), 16; *Polk’s Nashville City Directory Street and Avenue Guide* (Taylor, MI: R.L. Polk and Co, 1980), 10; *Polk’s Nashville City Directory Street Directory* (Michigan: R.L. Polk and Co, 1991), 8.

<sup>61</sup> James Hoobler, Senior Curator, Art and Architecture, Tennessee State Museum, personal communication with author, September 12, 2012; Jonathan Meador, “Onetime retail hub Hickory Hollow Mall looks bleak now, but hope persists for its future,” *Nashville Scene*, 28 June 2012.

<sup>62</sup> Jim Ridley, “The Street Where We Lived - Recalling Church Street’s Glory Days,” *Nashville Scene*, 8 February 1996; Jennifer Cardwell, Marketing Specialist - Rivergate Mall, personal communication with author, September 14, 2012.; Karen Bottoms, Management Assistant - The Mall at Green Hills, personal communication with author, September 14, 2012.

<sup>63</sup> *Ryman Auditorium Timeline*. <http://www.ryman.com/history/> (accessed July 6, 2012).

<sup>64</sup> The One Price Clothing Store is listed at 242 in the 1997 *Polk’s Nashville City Directory Street Guide* (Michigan: R.L. Polk and Co, 1997), 6.

## B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: 75 feet by 42 feet.<sup>65</sup>
2. Foundations: Rubble stone with irregular coursing. The foundation is higher towards the rear (east) of the building than at the front, where it is not visible.
3. Walls: The majority of the walls are brick using common (6:1) bond. On the west (front) façade, there are rusticated stone pilasters at either edge of the façade at ground level. The three upper stories are sheathed with an elaborate decorative sheet metal façade that includes a variety of ornamentation. There are belt courses that define each floor above the first story. On the second and third floors there are metal pilasters either side of the window bays. On the fourth floor, there are pilasters on either side of the central window and engaged columns at both edges of the facade. The pilasters and columns are topped by modified Corinthian capitals. On the top west end of the north façade, the words “Pianos” and “Organs” are visible on the brickwork. A photograph dating from ca. 1900 indicates that these remain from a sign that had been painted onto the wall by that time (see Figure 2).
4. Structural system, framing: Load bearing brick with stone foundations. In the basement and first two floors, there are iron columns supporting a central wood summer beam. In the basement, these columns are set on stone piers. In the upper two floors, the columns are similarly arranged but are made of wood. Again, they support a wood summer beam. The front wall appears to be a modified curtain wall and is connected to the main beam by diagonal wood beams that form a Y shape. The roof support system is wood rafters.
5. Porches, stoops, balconies, bulkheads: None
6. Chimneys: Brick chimneys visible in historic photos on the north side elevation do not appear to be extant.
7. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and doors: There is a utilitarian glass and aluminum door on the south side of the front façade. Doorways on the rear (east) façade have been in-filled with cinder block.
  - b. Windows and shutters: The modern commercial storefront includes large aluminum and glass display windows. On the upper three floors, each floor has three bays of windows, which in turn each contain three window openings. All the windows are double-hung sash windows topped by transoms. In the center bay, there are shallow elliptical arches above the transoms. At the rear (east) façade of the building, all window openings have been bricked in.
8. Roof:
  - a. Shape, covering: The building has a flat roof pitched downward to the rear for drainage. The covering is presumably some sort of tar and chip or rolled asphalt material.

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<sup>65</sup> Information found at the website for “Property Appraisal and Assessment Data, Davidson County - Nashville, Tennessee” via <http://www.padctnwebpro.com/WebproNashville/Summary.asp?A1=1904721&A2=1> 3 August 2012.

- b. Cornice: The front façade has an oversized decorative parapet that includes a central sunburst motif and modified central antefix at the roofline. There is a robust cornice that is embellished with dentils, and there are also scallops on the brackets. At either end of the cornice there are crouched classical figures supporting the end brackets. There is a raised pointed arch design across the frieze of the cornice. An early photograph shows that lettering across the lower part of the frieze spelling out “Jesse French Pianos & Organs” with the word “Piano” being featured more prominently in the central section.<sup>66</sup> Today, the remains of the words “Starr Piano Starr” are evident.
- c. Pinnacle: Early photographs show that decorative pinnacles at each end of the cornice have been removed.

### C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: Each floor is basically an open space with a few interior partition walls that create small rooms and storage spaces. On the ground and second floor, these partitions appear to have been added in the mid- to late-twentieth century. Those in place on the upper two floors are likely to have been created much earlier, if not at the time of construction.
2. Stairways: The building has straight-run wood staircases between each floor. These are located near the northeast rear corner of the floors with each one stacked over the other. The staircases are flanked by the wall on the north side and mostly have banisters with spindle balustrades and a simple handrail on the other side. However, in the case of the stairway leading to the first floor, the stairway has a metal railing. The stairway between the first floor and the cellar is a simple open wood stair.
3. Flooring: On the ground floor, there is modern tan vinyl tile flooring. On the upper three floors, there is wood tongue and groove flooring using fairly narrow boards. In any places where the floor is covered with linoleum, it is likely that beneath it there remains of similar wood tongue and groove flooring.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: On the ground floor, the walls are covered by slat board. The walls of the second, third and fourth floors are mostly covered in plaster but there are a few areas where some remnants of wallpaper remain. On the ground floor, the ceiling is covered with very low placed acoustic tiles which considerably lower the original ceiling height. On the upper floors the ceilings are plaster.
5. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and Doors: On the first and second floor, the few interior doorways have been altered by the installation of modern doors. On the third and fourth floors, the typical interior doorway has a wide wood trim fluting and bullseye corner blocks that appear to be original. The doors are solid wood in several patterns from early cross and bible doors, five horizontal recessed panels, and two large panels. Some of these appear to be original (with Eastlake-style hinges) and some appear to be of later origin.

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<sup>66</sup> “5th Avenue between Church Street and Union Avenue shows the Jesse French Piano Company and the Camp Sewing Machine Company.” Photographer: Calvert. Image ID 3610, Negative 568, File Location: Drawer 18, Folder 123, Tennessee State Library and Archives. Accessed via <http://tnsos.org/tsla/imagesearch/citation.php?ImageID=3610> 12 August 2012.

- b. Windows: The interior trim has been altered and is modern on the lower floors. On the upper floors, the window trim echoes that of the original doors, i.e. there is fluting and bullseye corner blocks. There are wood sills with a moderate overhang.
6. Decorative features and trim: The structural columns have decorative capitals. The wood columns on the upper floors stand on plinths and have a vertically central decorative band of incised lines and a turned spindle capital.
  7. Hardware: Noteworthy hardware includes original doorknobs and hinges with an incised Eastlake-style design. These can be found on a number of the doors on the upper two floors.
  8. Mechanical equipment:
    - a. Heating, air conditioning, ventilation: In the basement there are various types of heating and ventilation equipment, some of which are no longer functional. There is a modern forced air system for the ground floor and vents are placed among the acoustic ceiling tiles. On the upper floors, there are surviving cast iron radiators that are no longer functional. They appear to be original and have a decorative appearance. There is no air-conditioning on the upper three floors.
    - b. Lighting: On the ground floor, there is modern fluorescent strip lighting. On the upper floors, there are some pendant lights that appear to date from around the mid-twentieth century.
    - c. Plumbing: Modern plumbing fixtures were available on the ground floor. The status of historic plumbing fixtures is not available.
    - d. Miscellaneous: There is an elevator shaft that reaches all five floors of the building. However, there is no functional elevator or system still in place.

D. Site:

1. Historic landscape design: The French Building sits in an urban setting and fills its entire lot. There is a very narrow alley to the rear.

### PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- A. Architectural drawings: Design and construction drawings for the Jesse French Piano and Organ Company have not been located.
- B. Early Views: An artist's rendering of the front façade of the Jesse French Piano and Organ Company building was published in an 1892 Nashville guide book and it may have been based on the original architect's plan.<sup>67</sup> In the illustration, the building consists of five stories, rather than the actual four that were built. This depiction may therefore represent an "enhanced" version of the architect's intended scheme.

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<sup>67</sup> Morrison, 120.

Photographs of the exterior and interior have also been located. Those of the exterior were taken in ca. 1900 and ca. 1911 and are in the collection of the Tennessee State Library and Archives. They are reproduced in Figures 2 and 4. A photograph of the interior was taken by Otto Giers and found in the 1896 *Centennial Album – Nashville, Tennessee* published by J Prousnitzer and Company. Another photograph of the interior appeared in a January 31, 1900 spread on the company in the *Music Trade Review* and is reproduced in Figure 3.

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Davidson County Register of Deeds: Property deeds.

Metro Archives: Clippings files, property deeds and maps.

Metro Historical Commission: National Register of Historic Places nomination documents and clippings files.

Nashville Room, Nashville Public Library: City Directories, downtown survey, clippings files, maps, photo archives and microfilms.

Tennessee State Library and Archives: Records of business incorporation, maps, photo archives and microfilms.

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#### PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

Written Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) documentation of the Jesse French Piano & Organ Company was undertaken as part of the 2012 HABS-SAH Sally Kress Tompkins Fellowship. The Fellowship is jointly sponsored by HABS and the Society of Architectural Historians (SAH) to allow a graduate student to work on a HABS history project. Rachel Hopkin (Western Kentucky University), 2012 Fellow, produced historical reports for several buildings related to the development of Nashville's music industry. HABS is within the Heritage Documentation Programs (HDP) division of the National Park Service (Catherine Lavoie, Chief, HABS; Richard O'Connor, Chief, HDP). Project planning was coordinated by Lisa P. Davidson, HABS historian and Chair, HABS-SAH Sally Kress Tompkins Fellowship Committee. Assistance was provided by Tim Walker, Executive Director, Nashville Metropolitan Historical Commission, and by Robbie Jones, Historic Nashville Inc. In addition, the assistance of Deborah Cox (Archivist, Nashville Metro Archives), Mrs. Laurel Martin, Dr. David Joyner (Pacific Lutheran University), Charles Robin (Robin Realty), Robert Oermann (journalist and writer) and the staff of "Fox's Beauty Supply" is gratefully acknowledged.

PART V. ILLUSTRATIONS

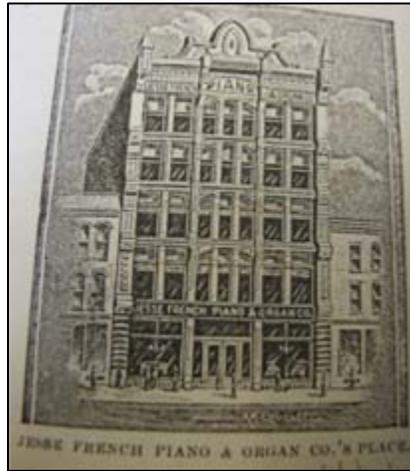


Figure 1: Artist's Rendering of Jesse French Piano & Organ Co. Building.  
Source: Andrew Morrison, *The Engelhardt Series: American Cities - The City of Nashville*  
(St Louis, MO: Geo. W. Engelhardt, 1892), 120.



Figure 2: Jesse French Piano Company, ca. 1900.  
Source: Image ID 3610, Tennessee State Library and Archives.



Figure 3: This ca. 1900 illustration incorporated photographs of both the interior and exterior of the store with headshots of the twenty-six employees. Source: "The Jesse French Branch at Nashville" *Music Trade Review* (31 January 1900), 30.



Figure 4: Starr Piano Company, ca. 1911.  
Source: Image ID 3618, Tennessee State Library and Archives.



Figure 5: The Jesse French Piano & Organ Company Building.  
Source: Photograph by author, 19 July 2012.