

HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION
STAFF REPORT

HPC Meeting Date: 05-09-2022
Ald. District 14, Marina Dimitrijevic
Staff Reviewer: Carlen Hatala

PROPERTY Filer and Stowell Company Complex
147 East Becher Street
Milwaukee, WI 53207

OWNER/APPLICANT Brian Read
Beta-Becher Acquisition Company, LLC.
147 East Becher Street
Milwaukee, WI 53207

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PROPOSAL Certified Local Government Review of the Filer and Stowell Company
Complex at 147 East Becher Street

STAFF COMMENTS The Filer and Stowell Company was founded by Delos Filer and John Stowell in 1856 and was originally known as Cream City Iron Works. The factory was located in Walker's Point. The company moved to the current location in 1892 and stayed in business here through 1989. The Filer and Stowell Company Complex under consideration for listing in the National Register consists of 11 buildings and their associated additions, sitting on an 11 acre site. The parcel is 1250 feet long by 330 feet Wide. The complex is located in the Bay View area and bordered by East Becher to the north, East Lincoln to the south, South 1st Street to the west and the Amtrak/Hiawatha and Canadian Pacific Railroad rail corridor to the east. This was a heavily industrialized area from the latter 19th century until the mid-20th century. In general, the Filer and Stowell complex is arranged in two long vertical rows with buildings constructed along a now-abandoned central rail spur. The buildings are of asystylistic design except for the Art Deco style office at the north end of the complex along Becher Street.

The company is significant under Criteria A of the National Register program for its importance in contributing to Milwaukee's industrial prominence in the 19th and through the mid part of the 20th century.

Filer and Stowell was the third company at this site. The property had belonged early on to Frederick L. Ziemer whose Italianate house stood at the factory grounds until the turn of the twentieth century. Whitehill Sewing Machine Company constructed the first building here in 1881, designed by H. C. Koch. Wilkin Manufacturing Co. moved onto the site in 1888 and produced lumber mill machinery. It added to the site. In 1892 Filer and Stowell moved to the site, constructed still more buildings and additions, and remained here through 1989.

Filer and Stowell manufactured sawmill machinery for which there was great demand as the state's great forests were extensively logged. Their machinery included everything needed to run a mill from Corliss engines to various types of saws.

As the forests were depleted, the company went on to manufacture marine engines, automobiles, trucks, auto parts, pumping equipment, winches, fire hydrants, beer pumps, and brass and iron castings. During WW II the company was one of only fourteen foundries in the US that made marine steam engines for Liberty Ships, used to supply troops in Europe.

This diversity led to the construction and additions to the engine room, foundry, and forge, and various other shops (forge, wood, machine, flask repair). A new office building was constructed in 1930 facing East Becher Street.

Between 1877 and 1957 the company secured 57 U.S. patents for a variety of mill types, parts, mechanisms and processes. In the 1950's Filer and Stowell was recognized as the largest producer of sawmill machinery in the country. The industrial landscaped changed thereafter as companies closed or relocated to other countries. Filer and Stowell's workforce dropped from 500 to an average of 20.

In 1998 the company sold the Becher Street complex and relocated to 3939 W. McKinley where it continued to make sawmill machinery until 2020.

Filer and Stowell was one of four giants in Milwaukee's manufacturing history along with E. P. Allis (later Allis Chalmers), Nordberg and Vilter Manufacturing. It was distinguished by its production of sawmill machinery.

The Filer and Stowell Complex stands in stark contrast to such industries as brewing, where the brewery buildings were given architectural presence and were designed by prominent architects or engineers. The Filer and Stowell buildings were utilitarian in keeping with the hot and dangerous processes used in pouring metal and casting machinery. There appears to have been not much thought about appearance. But the buildings do give us an insight into the well-built and traditional forms that housed the manufacturing that made Milwaukee famous.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Recommend that HPC support the nomination.