

## THE KENT BUILDING

### Statement of Significance

Significant through its association with morocco manufacturing in Wilmington during the early twentieth century the Kent Building (N-12470; see Figure 23, p. 130), erected in circa 1884, is eligible for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A, buildings associated with events contributing to broad patterns of history. Located on the east side of Orange Street between the Christina River and the AMTRAK Northeast Corridor, the Kent Building illustrates the growth of Wilmington as a center for the manufacture of morocco leather. The manufacture of leather and tanneries, a significant industry in Wilmington as early as the late eighteenth century, experienced a dramatic increase in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Serving as a warehouse and storage facility for unprocessed hides and finished morocco leather, the Kent Building's location along the Pennsylvania Railroad (PRR) and the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad (B&O) proved extremely beneficial to F. Blumenthal & Co, one of the largest manufacturers of morocco in the world during the 1910s. Related to Blumenthal & Co., and later with Blumenthal's successor, the Amalgamated Leather Industries, the Kent Building stands as the only documented resource in the Waterfront Analysis Area associated with the manufacture of leather, an extremely significant industry in Wilmington during the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>82</sup>

The Kent Building stands in the Wilmington Waterfront Analysis Area, a tract roughly defined by lands bordering the Christina and Brandywine Rivers in wilmington. The Waterfront Area also lays within the Urban Geographic Zone (Zone V; see Figure 4, p. 9), an area described by the Delaware Comprehensive Historic Preservation Plan as bounded by the City of Wilmington's corporate limits. Although situated within the Urban Zone, the Waterfront Analysis Area actually forms part of the Coastal Geographic Zone (Zone IV). Formed by land surrounding major and minor streams flowing into the Delaware River and Bay, the Coastal Zone once contained a rich and diverse natural environment. The Zone's many marshes and wetlands provided a home for turtles, muskrat, wood ducks, great blue herons, ospreys, turkey vultures and bald eagles in addition to many species of fish. Arrowarum, spatterdock, water-willow, smartweed, and red and white oak offered a safe haven for wildlife as well. Flora and fauna related to these species may survive in portions of southern and eastern Wilmington where less-intensive

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<sup>82</sup> Although included among the J. Morton Poole & Co. associated buildings (Complex #8) by the Wilmington Waterfront Analysis Area Reconnaissance Level Survey, research has not uncovered any relationship between the Kent Building (N-12470) and the J. Morton Poole & Co.

development has occurred. Soil content throughout the Zone varies from moderately well-drained and medium-textured loam to tidal wetlands. Vestiges of the city's early shoreline dating to the first european settlement have been destroyed by landfill and other development activities. The Waterfront Analysis Area describes a discrete geographical area established by the City of Wilmington's Office of Planning.<sup>83</sup>

The Kent Building warehouse relates to the historic theme 6E in the Delaware Comprehensive Historic Preservation Plan (Manufacturing, 1880-1940 +/-: Urbanization and Early Suburbanization). Characterized by establishments usually housed in plants, factories or mills, manufacturing delineates enterprises using power driven machinery and/or handling equipment in the mechanical or chemical transformation of inorganic or organic materials into new products.<sup>84</sup> The period of Urbanization and Early Suburbanization (1880-1940 +/-) witnessed a great diversity of industry throughout the city spurred by the construction of the Philadelphia, Wilmington and Baltimore Railroad (PW&B). Industries along the Waterfront Area, dominated by iron shipbuilders, metal processing firms, machine manufacturers, and railcar and railroad related factories, began to experience periods of slow and prolonged decline. Changing economics and shifting markets resulted in plant closings, the merging of local industries with national corporations and the shifting of product lines to meet demands for new manufactures.

The City of Wilmington's industrial diversity included the manufacture of morocco or goat kid leather. With local supplies of fresh water and tanbark readily accessible after the construction of the PW&B, the manufacture of leather slowly rose among Wilmington's industries becoming the second largest employer and first in value of product by the end of the nineteenth century. In 1860 leather production accounted for \$894,980 worth of product, ranking third in the city, while employing nearly 400 people, ranking fourth. Twenty years later the manufacture of leather ranked second in number of employees but still third in product value. By 1900 leather production led in the value of manufactures, \$9,379,504, but remained second in total employees with 2,454. All types of leather were produced in Wilmington including belting, bookbindings, and shoe uppers. Heavy morocco found its way to local manufactories where upholsterers worked the leather into railcar seats, carriage cushions and steamboat furniture. Wilmington's morocco manufacture ranked behind only Philadelphia's in 1890. Some of these firms lasted well into the twentieth century. In 1929 the Allied Kid Company acquired the McNeely Company, the successor of a firm founded in 1809, and

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<sup>83</sup> Ames, et al., pp. 31-36.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., pp. 26, 36-37.

manufactured morocco kid leather until 1977. Allied became one of Wilmington's largest exporters of kid in the 1940s. Jonathan Rhoads, from Marple Township in Pennsylvania, established a tanyard in Wilmington in 1868. He and his sons operated tanneries and belt leather manufactories in Wilmington until 1976. An early twentieth century history detailed 23 morocco and leather makers in Wilmington. As late as 1959 the Chamber of Commerce advertized Wilmington as the world's center for glazed kid and morocco leather manufacture.<sup>85</sup>

The evolution of tanning and leather production mirrors developmental trends in other industries. Prior to the construction of the railroad which provided access to raw materials and markets leather manufacture centered in small tanyards. After the railroad and the implementation of steam powered technologies the number and size of leather and morocco firms began a steady ascent. Two tanneries and 25 leather makers, saddlers and harness makers were enumerated in Wilmington in 1840. By 1860 seven morocco makers, three tanners and three curriers were counted while ten years later two tanners, 12 morocco and leather manufacturers, and one patent leather maker were listed. Nineteen morocco, patent leather, curriers and leather manufacturers were counted in 1880 in addition to one leather belting maker. In 1890 seventeen morocco manufacturers were listed and 19 establishments tanning, currying and finishing leather resided in Wilmington in 1900. The Kent Building helps to illustrate this growth in tanneries and morocco manufacturers in Wilmington during the late nineteenth century.<sup>86</sup>

Daniel H. Kent acquired the lot upon which the building now stands in 1882 along with two agricultural tracts in New Castle County. An insurance survey of the adjacent Poole & Co. property completed in 1877 indicates that the Kent grounds contained no buildings (see Figure 24, p. 133). An 1874 pictorial view of Wilmington depicts two small buildings on the site, neither of which appear in the later insurance survey. This same view shows the D. H. Kent & Co., manufacturers agents and importers of iron and coach materials, on Shipley Street above Second. In spite of the 1885 date incised into the peak of the building's gable, Kent probably erected the six-story brick warehouse prior to selling the building and its vacant rear lot fronting on the Christina River to the Alfred G.

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<sup>85</sup> Hoffecker, pp. 25, 32-33, 166-67; Thomas, ed., p. 13; Historic American Engineering Record, "J. E. Rhoads and Sons" (DE-17); Conrad, pp. 383-93; Chamber of Commerce (1959), p. 83.

<sup>86</sup> "Industrial Statistics For the State of Delaware Taken from the Census of 1840." Microfilm on file at EMHL; U. S. Census, Manufacturing Schedules, 1860, 1870, 1880. Microfilm on file at EMHL; Department of the Interior (1890), p. 618; Department of the Interior (1900), p. 112.

Smith & Warner Axle Co. in July of 1884.<sup>87</sup>

By 1886, a two-story frame office building with an attached one-story frame storage shed were constructed in the rear, southern lot of the Kent Building property (see Figure 25, p. 134). The Wilmington Warehousing Company occupied the Kent Building at that time. A 28-horsepower engine operated by the Cooperative Coal & Wood Yard sawed and split wood in the rear building according to an 1897 insurance map. In all likelihood both properties served as storage facilities for the trans-shipment of materials over nearby rail lines. The Philadelphia, Wilmington & Baltimore Railroad tracks, directly north of the Kent Building in the middle of Water Street, had tied Wilmington's waterfront areas to suppliers of raw materials and distant larger markets since 1837. The Baltimore & Ohio Railroad similarly operated along Water Street on rails formerly owned by the Wilmington & Western Railroad. In 1888 the B&O constructed a new passenger and freight station directly west of the Kent Building. The construction of the Kent Building may reflect speculative building in anticipation of increased freight service throughout the riverfront area. Beginning in 1898 the Kent Building served as a storage facility for the warehousing of goat skins and finished morocco leather.<sup>88</sup>

When Ferdinand Blumenthal and Julian Ullman, trading as the F. C. Blumenthal & Co., purchased the former Kent properties in 1898 the complex began a nearly 65 year association with the morocco and leather-making industries in Wilmington. Blumenthal & Co. traces its origins to 1881 when Isaac T. Quigley and Charles Mullen began tanning morocco at the corner of Fourth and Monroe streets. Mullen left the firm in 1882 and moved three blocks south starting a morocco factory at the southwest corner of Front and Monroe. Daniel Pierson joined Mullen's firm in 1888, buying Mullen out completely the next year. In 1891, Blumenthal and Ullman purchased Pierson's factory and began acquiring neighboring properties until the tannery composed the whole block bounded by Front and Chestnut streets between Monroe and Adams streets. By the early twentieth century the F. Blumenthal Co. morocco factory was the second largest tannery in the world. Richard Patzowsky became manager of the Blumenthal & Co. tannery in 1893 leaving in 1900 to start the New Castle Leather Company. The New Castle Leather Company's former Administration Building and Payroll Offices and its raw stock warehouse, both erected in 1917 and located on North Poplar Street in Wilmington, were listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1985 and 1983 respectively. An early twentieth

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<sup>87</sup> NCC Deed Book: I-12-330, C-13-36. NCCRD; Hexamer General Surveys, No. 1157 (August 1877). Microfilm on file at EMHL; Bailey & Co. (1874).

<sup>88</sup> Hexamer General Surveys, No. 2002 (June 1886). Microfilm on file at EMHL; Sanborn (1897).

century history of Delaware described the F. C. Blumenthal & Co. morocco factory as "one of the most prosperous and enterprising of the Wilmington manufactories" succeeded by none in terms of output. In addition the Blumenthal & Co. tannery employed hundreds of local residents shipping their finished leather throughout the United States.<sup>89</sup>

Blumenthal & Co. erected the present two story, brick storehouse adjoining the Kent Building to the rear soon after buying the property. The present configuration of the Kent Building complex appears in a 1901 atlas although improperly labeled as occupied by T. Blumenthal & Co. (see Figure 26, p. 145). By 1914, the former Kent buildings were used for the storage of goat skins by F. Blumenthal & Co. (see Figure 27, p. 146). Blumenthal & Co. changed its name in 1919 to the Amalgamated Leather Companies. Amalgamated retained ownership of the former Kent property until 1964. A 1936 atlas describes the Wilmington Warehousing Co. as the buildings' occupants. This company's relationship to the firm of the same name occupying the complex in 1886 has not been revealed. The present owners acquired the property in 1976 and continue to use the buildings for storage and warehouse space.<sup>90</sup>

Related to the historic theme Manufacturing during the period of Urbanization and Early Suburbanization (1880-1940 +/-) in Wilmington, the Kent Building helps illustrate the rise of leather manufacturing concerns throughout Wilmington during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Significant through its association with the F. Blumenthal & Co, and later the Amalgamated Leather Companies, the Kent Building stands as the only documented resource related to morocco manufacture in the Wilmington Waterfront Analysis Area, an area dominated by metal processing and manufacturing firms, iron shipbuilders and railcar and railroad related manufacturers during this period. Although probably constructed between 1882 and 1884 the building most strongly relates to the period of Blumenthal's ownership. Serving as a warehouse and storage facility for the importing and exporting of hides and finished leather, the Kent Building directly participated in the leather manufacture process. Owned by Blumenthal and Amalgamated for nearly 70 years, the Kent Building helps document the twentieth century history of morocco manufacture in Wilmington and as such is eligible for inclusion on the National Register of

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<sup>89</sup> NCC Deed Book: Q-17-81. NCCRD; Conrad, p. 387; Hoffecker, A Pictorial History, p. 147; Allied Leather Company, National Register of Historic Places Nomination, N-2974; Kaumagraph Building, National Register of Historic Places Nomination, N-3652. Copies on file at the City of Wilmington Office of Planning, Wilmington, Delaware.

<sup>90</sup> Baist (1901); Sanborn-Perris (1914); NCC Deed Book: W-22-318, Q-72-577, K-94-173; Franklin (1936).

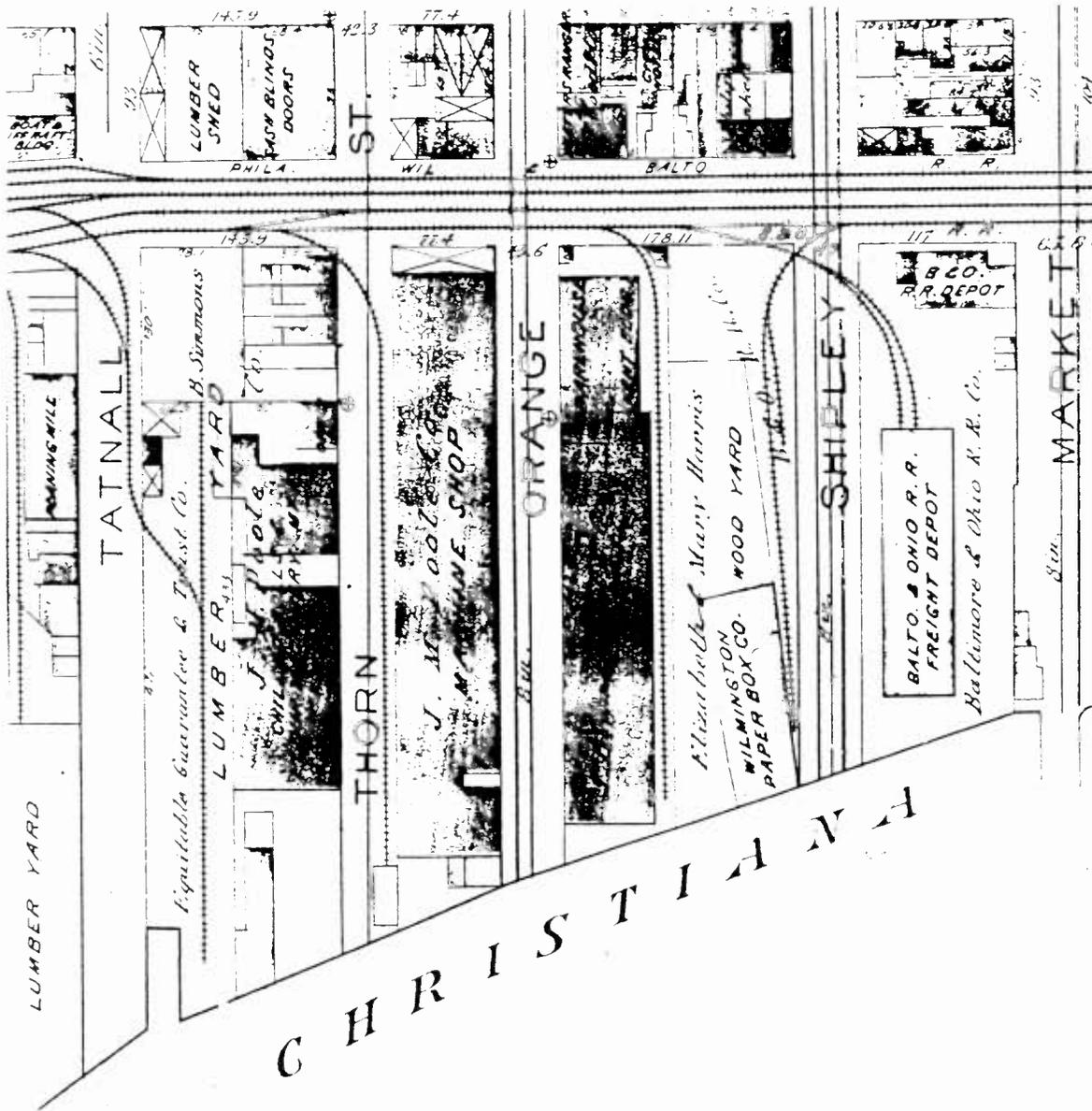


Figure 26: Detail of the Kent Building from Baists Property Atlas of the City of Wilmington, Delaware, 1901  
 (Reprinted courtesy of the Office of Planning)

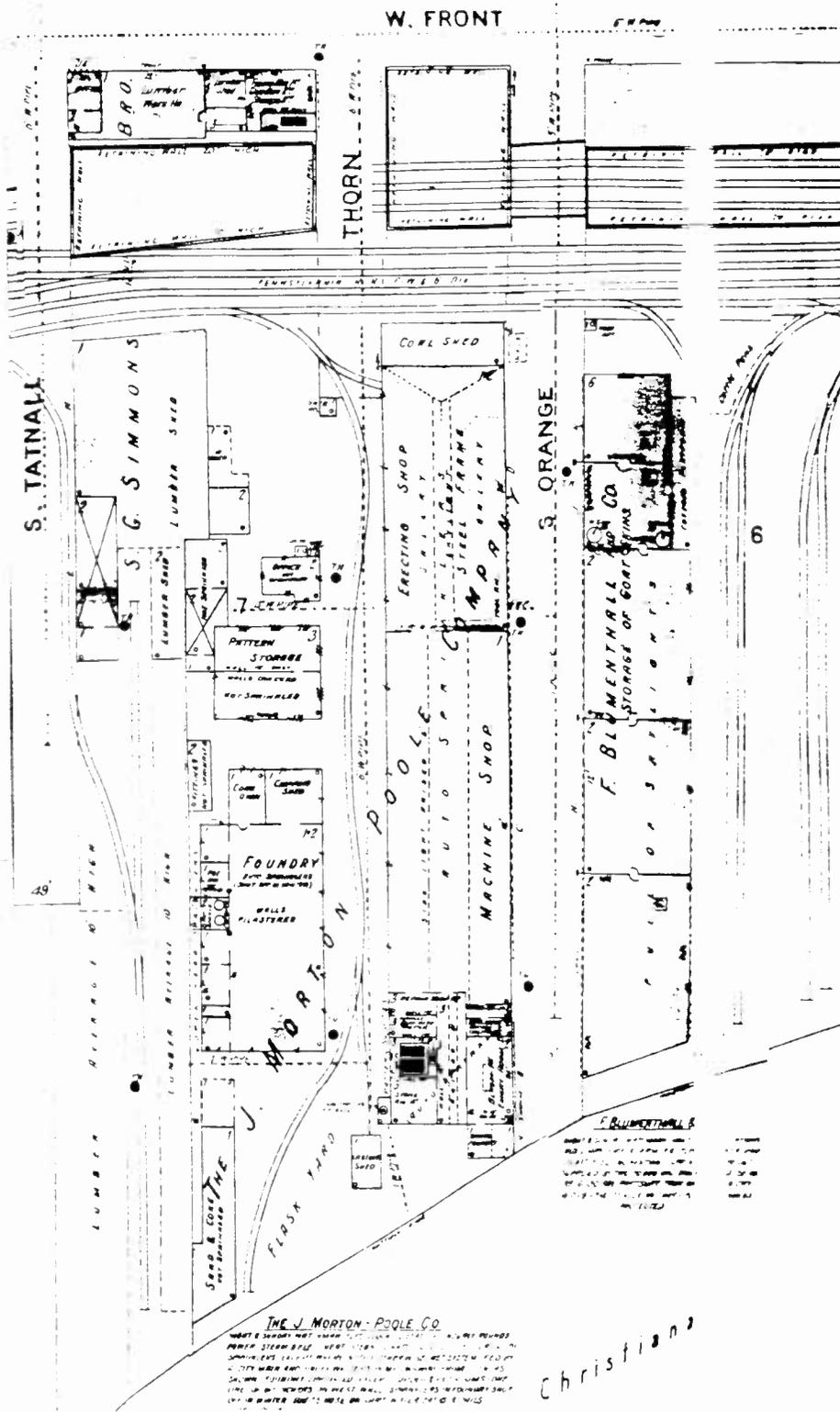


Figure 27: Detail of the Kent Building from Sanborn's Insurance Maps of Wilmington, Delaware, Corrected to 1914 (Reprinted courtesy of the Eleutherian Mills Historical Library)

Historic Places under Criterion A, buildings associated with events contributing to broad patterns of history.

## Architectural Description

Located on the southeast corner of Orange and Water streets, the Kent Building (N-12470; see Figure 23, p. 130) stretches southward to the banks of the Christina River on 1.5 acres of land. Erected in 1885 according to the dated pediment, the Kent Building (N-12470; see Plate 25, p. 149) stands six storys high with a basement. The building's roof exhibits a east-west oriented gable roof possessing elaborately ornamented pediments in addition to a smaller hipped roof crossing the gable on a north-south axis. Displaying five-to-one common bond brick with a molded tin cornice above dentiled corbeling, the Kent Building possesses eight bays along its' west and east elevations and four bays on its' north and south elevations. Black paint atop a white background between the fifth and sixth storys on the north and east elevation proclaims the building's owner: "Berger Bros. Office Furniture." A two-story with basement, shallowly-sloped gable-roofed brick wing extends far to the south overlooking the Christina River.

Brick piers describe five bays along the building's west elevation facing Orange Street and the Delaware Theater Company. The piers enclose pairs of windows in the central three bays while single windows penetrate the outer, side bays. The central bays pedimented-gable peak contains a stone plaque declaring "Kent Building 1885." Large rowlock semi-circular arches with corbeled keystones crown the outer, side bays. Corbeled string courses differentiate storys. Corrugated fiberglass shrouds upper story windows. Rowlock segmental arch lintels cap window bays. A wood lintel caps a wooden board and batten loading bay door on the sixth story. First, second and basement story openings are either filled with concrete block or covered with stuccoed.

The north elevation exhibits embellishment similar to the west elevation except only four bays pierce its upper storys. Six first-story bays contain two windows, two doors and two loading bays. The western steel door displays wood surrounds, a two-light transom, a rowlock segmental arch lintel and a four-step concrete threshold.

The east elevation's upper storys mirrors the west's upper storys including the dated pediment. In addition, a shed roof supported by square wood posts overhangs a wood plank loading dock along the first story of the elevation. Corrugated tin sheathes the roof. The first story contains three pairs of stuccoed windows with rowlock lintels flanking two sets of double steel doors with wood surrounds and rowlock segmental-arch lintels. A chimney pile protrudes from the building's roof between the second and third bay from the south. Many south elevation windows, visible above the roof of the southern wing, contain metal shutters and wooden sash with arched heads.

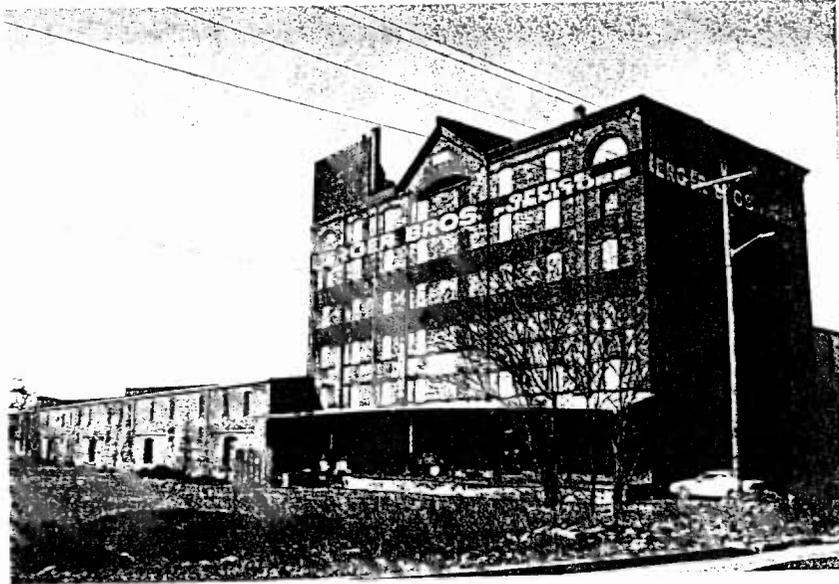


Plate 25: East and north elevations of the  
Kent Building (N-12470) looking west  
(Photograph by Stuart Dixon)

The southern wing, constructed of nine-to-one common bond brick, possesses two interior brick walls penetrating its roof and a corbeled cornice. Double rowlock segmental-arched lintels crown most openings. Sixteen bays stretch along the building's western elevation. Five loading bays evenly spaced along the first story contain metal doors. Runners above the loading bays denote the existence of earlier sliding doors. Window openings exhibit concrete block fill or stucco. First story windows are one-half the height of second story openings. A basement door penetrates the northern end of the west elevation.

The wing's south elevation parallels the angled shoreline of the Christina River instead of perpendicular to the east and west elevations. Two upper story loading bays penetrate west of the south elevation's corbeled peak. Stucco covers the western-most bay while the east bay contains a wooden board-and-batten door. Concrete block fills the two first-story loading bays. Rowlock segmental arch lintels crown all bays.

Sixteen bays, all former windows, pierce the second story of the wing's eastern elevation. Five of thirteen first story bays display loading docks similar to the wing's west elevation. Concrete block obstructs the eight window openings. Although a Franklin Insurance Co. map updated in the 1970s indicates a "roof full of skylights," a recent site visit could not confirm their existence from ground level.