

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

900-908 WEST NORTH AVENUE (COMMERCIAL BUILDINGS) (Reservoir Hill Historic District)

HABS No. MD-1444

Location: 900-908 West North Avenue, Baltimore, Maryland

900-908 West North Avenue is located at latitude: 39.310730, longitude: -76.632977. The coordinate represents the approximate center of the buildings and was obtained in 2022 using Google Earth (WGS84). There is no restriction on its release to the public.

Significance: The row of commercial buildings at 900-908 West North Avenue contributes to the Reservoir Hill Historic District's significance as an early twentieth century Jewish neighborhood. The buildings were developed and constructed in 1937-38 by Milton Schwaber, a Baltimore area builder and developer who was active in the Jewish community. 900-908 West North Avenue also represents North Avenue's historic role as a commercial center on an important east-west connector road in the City of Baltimore.

Description: 900-908 West North Avenue is a one-story, irregularly shaped masonry commercial building with five storefronts, separated by brick pilasters capped with simple chamfered concrete capitals. The exterior masonry walls feature glazed brick laid in a stretcher bond pattern with a soldier course at the top located below the metal coping. The brick color is yellow except for the soldier course and two horizontal bands (each band comprised of two brick courses) that are black. The plain metal coping is also painted black.

At the corner of West North and Linden avenues is an angled corner elevation facing southeast that contains the double-leaf entrance doorway into 900 West North Avenue. The northeast Linden Avenue elevation is a solid brick wall that is divided by four irregularly spaced pilasters (with details matching those on the West North Avenue façade) and that is penetrated only by a single-leaf man-door that leads into the rear of the 900 West North Avenue tenant space.

The storefront openings incorporate non-original assemblies of modern swing-doors, metal roll-up security doors, metal-framed window systems and T1-11 painted wood siding panels. There is a variety of non-original illuminated and non-illuminated surface or pendant mounted signage as well as non-original canopies.

The building has a flat built-up roof with four large billboards mounted to steel framing. Two of the billboards approximately align with West North Avenue and face south while two others are mounted perpendicular to West North Avenue and face east.

The ground level floor plan of 900-908 West North Avenue was altered to create two business spaces: 900 and 902 were configured for use as a delicatessen, and 904, 906 and 908 were combined for use as a liquor store. Partitioned spaces within the delicatessen include an entry vestibule, customer service area, grocery display/deli prep, walk-in refrigerator, two storerooms, and two restrooms. Existing interior finishes and detailing are non-original and have no historic value except for a small (non-salvageable) section of floor that exhibits what is likely the original terrazzo flooring. Partitioned spaces within the liquor store include a customer service area, liquor/cigarette display area, walk-in refrigerator, storeroom, two restrooms, a service bar, and a seating area (on a raised platform floor).

At the western end of the 900-908 West North Avenue façade is a brick wall that originally served as an entrance to a theater at what was once called 910 West North Avenue. The former entrance was closed off when the theater was demolished and replaced with an L-shaped brick commercial building that has an entrance at 2000 Linden Avenue. The wall at the former theatre entrance retains two remnants of its original use: a six-course stepped brick decorative lintel over the infilled former lobby door opening, and linear Art Deco insets of glazed red brick in the upper portion of the façade (visible only on a small unpainted portion of brick behind the non-original canopy).

History: Between 1870 and 1890, the city's population increased by over 60%.¹ With the expanding population, various ethnic groups relocated to establish residence in areas further removed from the urban core. As part of this population shift, the German Jewish community moved uptown, resulting in five synagogues relocating uptown between 1892 and 1905. Indicative of this population shift is the fact that approximately 40% of the people listed in Baltimore's 1912 Jewish Social Directory were residents of Reservoir Hill.²

The 1901, 1915, and 1928 (updated 1953) Sanborn maps show a Protestant church on the site.³ Named the "North Avenue Baptist Church" in 1901, the

¹ Roderick N. Ryon, *West Baltimore Neighborhoods: Sketches of Their History, 1840-1960* (Baltimore, Maryland: The Institute for Publications Design at the University of Baltimore, 1993), xiv.

² Fred B. Shoken, "Reservoir Hill Historic District," National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2004), 8-5.

³ Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Baltimore, Independent Cities, Maryland, Vol. 2, 1901, Image 96, Map 203, https://www.loc.gov/resource/g3844bm.g3844bm_g03573190102/?sp=96&r=-1.171,-0.088,3.342,1.616,0; Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Baltimore, Independent Cities, Maryland, Vol. 7, 1915, Image 22, Map 684, https://www.loc.gov/resource/g3844bm.g3844bm_g03573191507/?sp=22&r=-0.362,0.039,1.774,0.827,0; Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Baltimore, Independent Cities, Maryland, Vol. 6, 1928 (updated 1953), Image 11, Map 621, https://www.loc.gov/resource/g3844bm.g3844bm_g03573195306/?sp=11&r=-0.61,0.145,2.22,1.034,0; all accessed 27 February 2024.

church later changed its name to the “McCormick Memorial Baptist Church” in honor of its seventeen-year pastor, Reverend H. P. McCormick.⁴

On June 24, 1934, the congregation held its last service in its church in anticipation of selling the building. The reason given for the sale was that “Most of the members of the church... live some distance above North Avenue” and therefore it was “inconvenient for them to arrange to bring their children to Sunday-school services and return for the other services themselves.” The decision was made that the members would join the University Baptist Church, which was geographically better situated and “more convenient and more able to care for the needs of the majority of the congregation.”⁵

In 1937, the Maryland Baptist Union Association sold the church to the St. Paul Realty Company for \$36,500. On September 4, the realty company, which had incorporated on December 5, 1904, announced that it was planning to build a motion picture theater at the northwest corner of North and Linden Avenues.⁶ In April 1938, a local press story about a \$35,000,000 building boom underway in the city listed one of the projects as a “Motion picture theater to seat 1,000, at northwest corner of North and Linden avenues.” The theater was described as being built by the St. Paul Realty Company at a cost of \$175,000.⁷ As originally designed, the theater had two entrances: one at the western end of the façade at 910 West North Avenue that was filled in when the theater was demolished ca. 1969, and one on Linden Avenue that was removed when the theater was demolished. In addition to the theater, the original project included the commercial buildings at 900, 904, 906, and 908 West North Avenue. The entire development was designed by architect John Jacob Zinc, AIA, who designed numerous theaters in Baltimore and Washington, D.C.⁸ The Linden Theater opened September 17, 1938.⁹

By the time that the St. Paul Realty Company purchased the West North Avenue property, Milton Schwaber, an active member of the Reservoir Hill Jewish community, was president of the development firm.¹⁰ Schwaber was a member of Chizuk Amuno Congregation in Reservoir Hill, served on the board of the

⁴ “Holding Last Services at McCormick Memorial,” *The Evening Sun* [Baltimore], 14 June 1934, 6, <https://www.newspapers.com/>, accessed 21 March 2021.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ “Church Site Taken for Movie Theater,” *The Sun* [Baltimore], 5 September 1937, 3, <https://www.newspapers.com/>, accessed 3 April 2021; “Notes from the Courts,” *The Sun*, 6 December 1904, 7, <https://www.newspapers.com/>, accessed 3 April 2021; Amtrak chain-of-title records (on file with Amtrak).

⁷ “\$35,000,000 Building Boom Now On In City; Projected Homes to Cover 245 Blocks,” *The Sun*, 11 April 1938, 18, <https://www.newspapers.com/>, accessed 3 April 2021.

⁸ Robert K. Headley, *Motion Picture Exhibition in Baltimore, An Illustrated History and Directory of Theaters, 1895-2004* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2006), 324-325.

⁹ *Ibid.*; “Sutton Theatre,” <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/45143>, accessed 2 April 2021.

¹⁰ “Notes from the Courts,” *The Sun*, 6 December 1904, 7, <https://www.newspapers.com/>, accessed 3 April 2021; William N. Watmough, “Project at Linden Avenue,” *The Sun*, 20 February 1938, 63, <https://www.newspapers.com/>, accessed 3 March 2021.

Levindale Home for the Aged, and was an active supporter of the Association of Jewish Charities.¹¹

Throughout the twentieth century, 900-908 West North Avenue contained a variety of businesses, including a drug store, offices, and some food-related businesses at 900-902; an ice cream parlor and liquor store at 904; a laundry facility at 906; a barber shop, a loan company, and a barbecue restaurant at 908.

Baltimore's business and telephone directories and local newspaper advertisements indicate the following history of businesses within the individual stores at 900-908 West North Avenue:¹²

900 West North Avenue

From the time the building first opened in 1938 until 1960, 900 West North Avenue, the building at the northwest corner of West North and Linden Avenues, appears to have contained a Read's Drug Store as well as offices affiliated with the Linden Theater and the developer/owner of the block of commercial buildings, under the names of "Schwaber Milton" in 1938; "Caplon Milton ofc." in 1940-1942; and "Brizendine Wilbert M. ofc." in 1943-1954. By 1965, only the drug store was listed for the corner building. In 1969-1970, the building housed the U.S. Social Security Administration Information, Northwest Office. By 1980, that office was gone and for the next approximately forty years, there was a series of food-related businesses, including Steak City, Inc. in 1980; Food Bazaar in 1984; and the Bruce Grocery & Sub Shop from 1985 through approximately 2019.

904 West North Avenue

In the 1938 City of Baltimore telephone directory, the Arundel Ice Cream Company, Inc. at 904 West North Avenue was the only business listed in the row of buildings, other than the offices for Linden Theater and the developer, Milton Schwaber, developer of the block, who were listed at 900 West North Avenue. Listings in city and telephone directories as well as newspaper advertisements indicate that the ice cream company was actually at the 904 address through 1958.¹³ After the ice cream store left this location, it appears that this store may have been vacant for approximately ten years. The city's telephone directories for June 1960 and October 1965 do not include a listing for 904 West North Avenue.

¹¹ "Milton Schwaber" obituary, *The Sun*, 14 July 1981, 13, <https://www.newspapers.com/>, accessed 3 April 2021.

¹² The following listings are based on: Environmental Data Resources, Inc., *The EDR-City Directory Abstract, 900-908 W. North Avenue, Baltimore, MD 21217*, 20 May 2019; The Chesapeake and Potomac Telephone Company of Baltimore City, annual telephone directories, 1938-1958 (on file at the Enoch Pratt Free Library, Baltimore, Maryland); and advertisements in *The Sun* and *The Evening Sun*, <https://www.newspapers.com/>, accessed 1 May 2021.

¹³ Arundel Ice Cream Company, "Royalty Returns!," Advertisement, *The Evening Sun*, 29 November 1955, 48, <https://www.newspapers.com/>, accessed 6 April 2021; "Slash Your Milk Bills," Advertisement, *The Evening Sun*, 20 April 1957, 5, <https://www.newspapers.com/>, accessed 6 April 2021; The Chesapeake and Potomac Telephone Company of Baltimore City, annual telephone directories, 1938-1958.

However, in 1968, Mr. and Mrs. Isadore Malinow, owners of a tavern at 909 West North Avenue, applied to the city to move their tavern, which was being lost due to urban renewal, across the street to 904-908 West North Avenue, although it is unclear if they were approved.¹⁴ From at least 1970 to 2022, a liquor store and/or lounge was in this location, under various names, including the Linden Lounge in the 1970s, and after 1980 Linden Bar & Liquors. After 1995, United Check Cashing and Western Union are sometimes listed in conjunction with Linden Bar & Liquors.

906 West North Avenue

From 1939 to approximately 1958, the commercial space at 906 West North Avenue served as a laundry facility. According to city directories and newspaper advertisements, it was Spotless Laundry & Cleaning Company from approximately October 1939 to 1942. In the mid-1940s, newspaper advertisements listed this location as one of sixteen locations for Fish Dry Cleaning.¹⁵ In 1958, 906 West North Avenue was listed in a city directory as the “Ftth Dry Cmn & Lndry Co ihr,” presumably the Fish Dry Cleaning & Laundry Co. By 1966-1967, however, 906 West North Avenue was listed as Bonaparte’s Florist Shop. Then, for many years, there was no listing for this address until the 1990 listing as “Hall H.,” although it is not clear what that represented.

908 West North Avenue

From approximately 1942 through 1960, 908 West North Avenue is listed in a city directory as a barber shop under the name of Max Wexlar. A May 4, 1945, classified ad in *The Sun* described a search for a barber to work at the Linden Barber Shop at 908 West North Avenue.¹⁶ The city’s 1953, 1956, and 1958 directories list 908 West North Avenue as the location of the Linden Barber Shop. In the 1960 and 1965 telephone directories, however, 908 West North is listed as the office of Nathan Baum, Raybaum Auto Loan Company, and Raybaum Small Loan Company. From 1985 to 2005, 908 West North Avenue is listed as the Real Rib Center (barbecue).

The stores at 900-908 West North Avenue were representative of North Avenue’s early-twentieth century role as a prominent east-west corridor with multiple commercial facilities. In a late twentieth century exhibit on the history of North Avenue, the avenue was described as “the place to shop for new cars and Havana cigars, to ice skate or view intramural ice hockey, to stroll in Easter finery or watch a passing parade, feast on German baked goods or sample the city’s finest

¹⁴ “Tavern Move Denied Owner,” *The Sun*, 21 September 1968, 27, <https://www.newspapers.com/>, accessed 3 March 2021.

¹⁵ Fish Dry Cleaners, “Hold on There,” Advertisement, *The Sun*, 27 May 1945, 16, <https://www.newspapers.com/>, accessed 1 May 2021.

¹⁶ “Barber,” Classified advertisement, *The Sun*, 4 May 1945, 16, <https://www.newspapers.com/>, accessed 1 May 2021.

ice creams.”¹⁷ Advertisements in early twentieth century newspapers and directories provide insight into North Avenue and the type of commercial facilities located along it. In addition to numerous advertisements for the North Avenue Market (further east), there were advertisements for a wide range of facilities, including automotive, manufacturing, and commercial.¹⁸

On December 27, 1943, the St. Paul Realty Company transferred the 900-908 West North Avenue property to Milton Schwaber and his wife, Cecelia.¹⁹ In 1958, Milton Schwaber and his partner, Howard Wagonheim, were described as operating three local art theaters and co-founding a new FM radio station in Baltimore, WFDS-FM, in order to “feature good music with emphasis on quality of sound reproduction.” The station’s program manager was Robert Benson, the assistant manager of the Baltimore Symphony.²⁰

During the mid-twentieth century, the theater transitioned operations several times. It closed in July 1953. New operators took over a year later, remodeled the theater and reopened it on July 29, 1954, as the Cinema. In the early 1950s, the theater was renovated and branded itself as an “art” theater that was described in the local press as one of two theaters on North Avenue that were “entering the high-class movie business.”²¹ In 1954, it was reported that the Linden Theater was to be called the Cinema.²² This operation lasted until the spring of 1963. On May 15, 1963, the theater reopened as the Capri Theatre, which showed adult movies. Four months later, on September 17, 1963, the theater re-opened again as a first run theater under the name of Sutton Theater.²³ The following month, October 1963, *The Sun* included the Sutton Theater in a listing of local art shows for an “Experiments in Art” exhibit of twelve paintings by Mark Shecter.²⁴

The Sutton Theater was closed in 1965.²⁵ On the 1971 Sanborn map, the area of the former theater is marked “NC – 1969,” indicating new construction in 1969.²⁶

¹⁷ “North Avenue...A Baltimore Tradition” exhibit panel (on file at the Enoch Pratt Free Library, Baltimore, Maryland, “North Avenue” vertical file).

¹⁸ “Clark’s Famous Cruises,” Classified advertisement, *The Sun*, 5 December 1926, 42; “Confectionery Store For Sale,” Classified advertisement, *The Sun*, 7 August 1924, 19; “Dodge and Buick Sedan,” classified advertisement, *The Sun*, 14 January 1922, 15; “Franklin Near Howard,” classified advertisement, *The Sun*, 8 January 1922, 25; “MT Royal Garage,” classified advertisement, *The Sun*, 7 September 1921, 17; “Plumbing and Heating Business,” Classified advertisement, *The Sun*, 18 November 2023, 37; <https://www.newspapers.com/>, accessed 1 May 2021.

¹⁹ Amtrak chain-of-title records (on file with Amtrak).

²⁰ “Radio News,” *The Sun*, 2 November 1958, 99, <https://www.newspapers.com/>, accessed 3 April 2021.

²¹ Janetta Somerset, “Art Film Expansion,” *The Sun*, 27 June 1954, A9, <https://www.newspapers.com/>, accessed 3 April 2021.

²² “On the Screen,” *The Evening Sun*, 23 June 1954, 42, <https://www.newspapers.com/>, accessed 3 April 2021.

²³ Headley, *Motion Picture Exhibition in Baltimore*, 324-325.

²⁴ “What’s To Be Seen,” *The Sun*, 13 October 1963, 123, <https://www.newspapers.com/>, accessed 3 March 2021.

²⁵ “Sutton Theatre,” <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/45143>, accessed 2 April 2021; Headley, *Motion Picture Exhibition in Baltimore*, 325.

²⁶ Sanborn Map Company, Baltimore Maryland, 1971, “Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps,” Collection of Environmental Data Resources, Inc.

The laundromat that is housed in the post-1969 building currently uses the address of 2000 Linden Avenue; however, it has also used the address of 918 West North Avenue.

When Milton Schwaber passed away in 1981, the property transferred to his wife Cecelia. On December 9, 1985, the Revocable Trust of Cecelia Schwaber was created, and on May 2, 1995, the property transferred from Cecelia Schwaber to the three trustees of the trust, Cecelia Schwaber, Myra Wagonheim, and Sidney Weiman. On January 4, 2010, 900-918 West North Ave., LLC was formed and took ownership of the property.²⁷ As of April 2021, the Registered Agent for 900-918 West North Ave. Center, LLC was listed as Mark D. Wagonheim, who was named in Milton Schwaber's obituary as his grandson.²⁸

Sources:

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²⁷ Amtrak chain-of-title records (on file with Amtrak).

²⁸ "910 Reisterstown Road Baltimore, MD 21208," <https://www.bizapedia.com/addresses/910-reisterstown-road-baltimore-md-21208.html>, accessed 3 April 2021; "Mark Wagonheim Obituary," <https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/baltimoresun/obituary.aspx?n=mark-d-wagonheim&pid=>; accessed 3 April 2021; "Milton Schwaber" obituary, *The Sun*, 14 July 1981, 13, <https://www.newspapers.com/>, accessed 3 April 2021.

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Historians: Nancy L. Zerbe, Steven Patrick, ARCH², Inc., 2022.

Project

Information: The documentation of 900-908 West North Avenue was undertaken in 2021-2022 as mitigation in accordance with the Section 106 Programmatic Agreement for the Frederick Douglass Tunnel Program, formerly the Baltimore & Potomac (B&P) Tunnel Replacement Program. 900-908 West North Avenue will be demolished to make way for construction of the Intermediate Ventilation Facility and the realignment of the Northeast Corridor associated with a new 1.9-mile-long tunnel north of the existing tunnel alignment. The documentation project was sponsored by the United States Department of Transportation Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) and the National Railroad Passenger Corporation (Amtrak), in coordination with the Maryland Historical Trust. It was prepared by Nancy L. Zerbe, Principal Investigator, and Steven Patrick, Historian. Jet Lowe prepared the large-format photography. Christopher H. Marston, HAER Architect, advised the project.