

LOWELL CULTURAL RESOURCES INVENTORY

IDENTIFICATION 176, 184, 188, 190 MIDDLE STREET MAP SHEET #7
1) CURRENT OWNER John and Stella Lagana OWNER OCCUPIED no
2) HISTORIC NAME J. C. Ayer company
3) CURRENT NAME Garment Manufacturing Company, Liberty Country Wear, Com-Pics
4) PROPERTY TYPE industrial 5) ZONING CLASSIFICATION B3
6) TAXES: PAYMENTS current STATUS clear
7) WITHIN BOUNDARIES OF LHPD, LNHP (partial), City Hall HD

HISTORICAL ABSTRACT

1) CONSTRUCTION DATE ca. 1890-1895
SOURCE circumstantial: 1896 atlas
2) ARCHITECT OR BUILDER unknown
3) HISTORIC OWNER J. C. Ayer Company
4) ORIGINAL USE: GF industrial UF industrial
5) PREVIOUS BLDGS ON PROPERTY yes DATE 1841- ca. 1890
SOURCE documented: 1841 map; 1879 and 1896 atlas

DESCRIPTIVE DATA

1) ARCHITECTURAL STYLE lt. 19th c. industrial VIEW FROM north PHOTO TAKEN May 1979
2) PRESENT USE:
GF industrial
UF industrial
3) NO OF STORIES 5
4) PROP SQ FT 6,660
5) PLAN rectangular
6) ROOF flat
7) STRUCTURAL SYSTEM
load-bearing masonry
8) OUTBUILDINGS
none
9) MATERIALS:
FOUNDATION
granite, rubblestone
FACADE F: red pressed brick in stretcher bond: S,R: red pressed brick in common bond
TRIM sides and fronts: granite cornice, sills and lintels
10) NOTABLE SURFACE & LANDSCAPE ELEMENTS none



ADDRESS 176, 184, 188, 190 MIDDLE STREET

VISUAL ASSESSMENT

- 1) CONDITION OF BUILDING FABRIC. needs minor repair
- 2) IF DETERIORATED, CAUSES lack of maintenance
- 3) INTEGRITY OF HISTORIC BLDG FABRIC: GF intact original fabric
UF intact original fabric
- 4) SURROUNDING LAND USES commercial, industrial, expressway
- 5) INTEGRITY OF PROP'S HIST SETTING intact with minor intrusions and or losses
- 6) IMPORTANCE OF PROP TO HIST SETTING integral to character

ADDITIONAL DESCRIPTION

See Research Report.

ADDITIONAL HISTORICAL INFORMATION

See Research Report.

ARCHEOLOGICAL COMMENT

This property was occupied by several structures as early as 1841, including a brick school building. The current five-story structure completely covers the lot and probably destroyed any below-ground remains of the earliest uses of the site.

Research Report
176-190 Middle Street
J.C. Ayer Co. Building
ca. 1890-95
(See Research Reports on 165 Market Street and 28 Jackson Street)

James C. Ayer established a patent medicine firm in Lowell in the 1840's that by the time of his death in 1878 was one of the largest non-textile businesses in the city. A general history of the firm can be found in the Research Report on 165 Market Street, the previous structure built to house the business in 1858-9. Premises earlier occupied and/or built by the Ayer enterprise are still extant at 28 Jackson Street and 201 Central Street. The brick structure at 176-190 Middle Street was the last one erected by the firm, around 1890.

Five stories high and twelve bays wide, the length of the facade is divided vertically by seven projecting piers running up the full height of the building and corbelled out at cornice level. This vertical emphasis is further enhanced by the diminishing window heights, moving up the building.

These vertical features are linked and counter-balanced by granite sill and lintel courses, and a corbelled brick cornice capped with granite. In color and texture the granite contrasts sharply with the pressed red brick. The otherwise austere facade has additional decorative corbeling above the first floor openings, simple variations in the texture of the brick surfaces over the second and fourth floors, and recessed panels above the fifth floor. At the center of the facade, between the second and third floors, is a granite plaque inscribed: "J.C. Ayer Co." On the west side wall of the building a painted sign for the J.C. Ayer Co. can still be read.

The present building on the 176-190 Middle Street site is not the first structure on this lot. Two small buildings and the larger Eighth Grammar School appear on this site on the 1841 map. The school must have been built around that date, as it is first listed in the city directory of 1842. The name of the school changed several times in the ensuing decades, to Green School (ca. 1851-58), Intermediate School No. 3 (1858- ca. 1864), and again the Green School (1864-1872).

In 1872 the school moved to Merrimack Street [1] and the Middle Street building and two small, adjacent, privately owned buildings were purchased by J. C. Ayer [2]. The two small buildings stood east of the school, and both had belonged to Lund and Conant at the time of the 1850 map. Since neither the 1849 nor 1851 directories list Lund or Conant on Middle Street, the form and function of those small buildings is unclear.

Ayer's patent medicine firm used the Middle Street building as its office, and the laboratory remained in the Market Street building [3]. The 1879 atlas indicates the former school (a brick structure) had been extended toward the west, and a separate, smaller building (not owned by Ayer) had been erected on the next lot west. The Ayer Co. appears to have rented parts of the Middle Street building during its occupancy. Listed at the address in 1880 is a physician, Vernon O. Taylor; in 1885 a printer, Robert S. Young; and in 1896, a language teacher named A. Marsigny.

After James Ayer's death in 1878, the firm continued to grow, and sometime between 1879 and 1896, the Middle Street buildings were removed, and the present 176-190 Middle Street was constructed [4]. Stylistically, it appears to have been built closer to 1890 than 1880. Figure One shows a somewhat idealized view of the Ayer complex on Market and Middle Streets. Figure Two, taken from the City Hall tower in the early 20th century, more accurately shows the buildings in their setting. 176-190 Middle Street is clearly visible at the center of the scene, with "J.C. Ayer Co." painted on its west wall. Adjacent to the right is 165 Market, a story lower and partially hidden by the tower of Huntington Hall, which housed the Boston and Lowell Railroad station.

All of the Ayer operations were consolidated into the Middle Street building by 1917. In 1938 and 1939, the Vita-Ray Corp., a cosmetic manufacturer, and Mass. Pharmaceutical Corp. joined J. C. Ayer Co. at 176 Middle. In 1940 J. C. Ayer Co. disappeared from the city directory, and Vita-Ray and Mass. Pharmaceutical remained in the Middle Street building. Periods of vacancy followed, but currently the building is occupied by several light manufacturing companies.

176-190 Middle Street seems to be in good condition, and remains very close to its original appearance. Although a bit later and somewhat larger than its immediate Middle Street neighbors, it is a key element of a nearly intact historic

streetscape which includes the small, Federal/Greek Revival neighbor to the west, the larger Lowell Institution for Savings across the street, and the nearby Italianate Lowell Gas Light Building and Romanesque Revival Central Engine House. The J. C. Ayer Co. Building also represents the final stage in the growth of a characteristic nineteenth century enterprise which sent Cherry Pectoral, Ayer's Hair Vigor, and millions of Ayer's Almanacs from Lowell around the world.

Footnotes

- 1) See the Research Report on the Green School, 408 Merrimack Street.
- 2) North Middlesex Registry, 86:176; 88:287 (1872).
- 3) History of Middlesex County, 1890, p.101.
- 4) 1879 and 1896 Lowell atlases.

References

Coburn, Federick, History of Lowell, 1920.

History of Middlesex County, 1890.

Lowell Courier, July 8, 1878 (reprinted in 1900).

Lowell City Directories.

1841, 1850, Maps of Lowell.

1879, 1896, 1906, 1924 Atlases of Lowell.



THE HOME OF THE HOUSE OF AYER.

Figure 1

U. of Lowell Library, documents file A 9037 -Ayer (with 1900 reprint of July 5, 1878 Lowell Courier obituary).

From U. of Lowell, Special Collections.

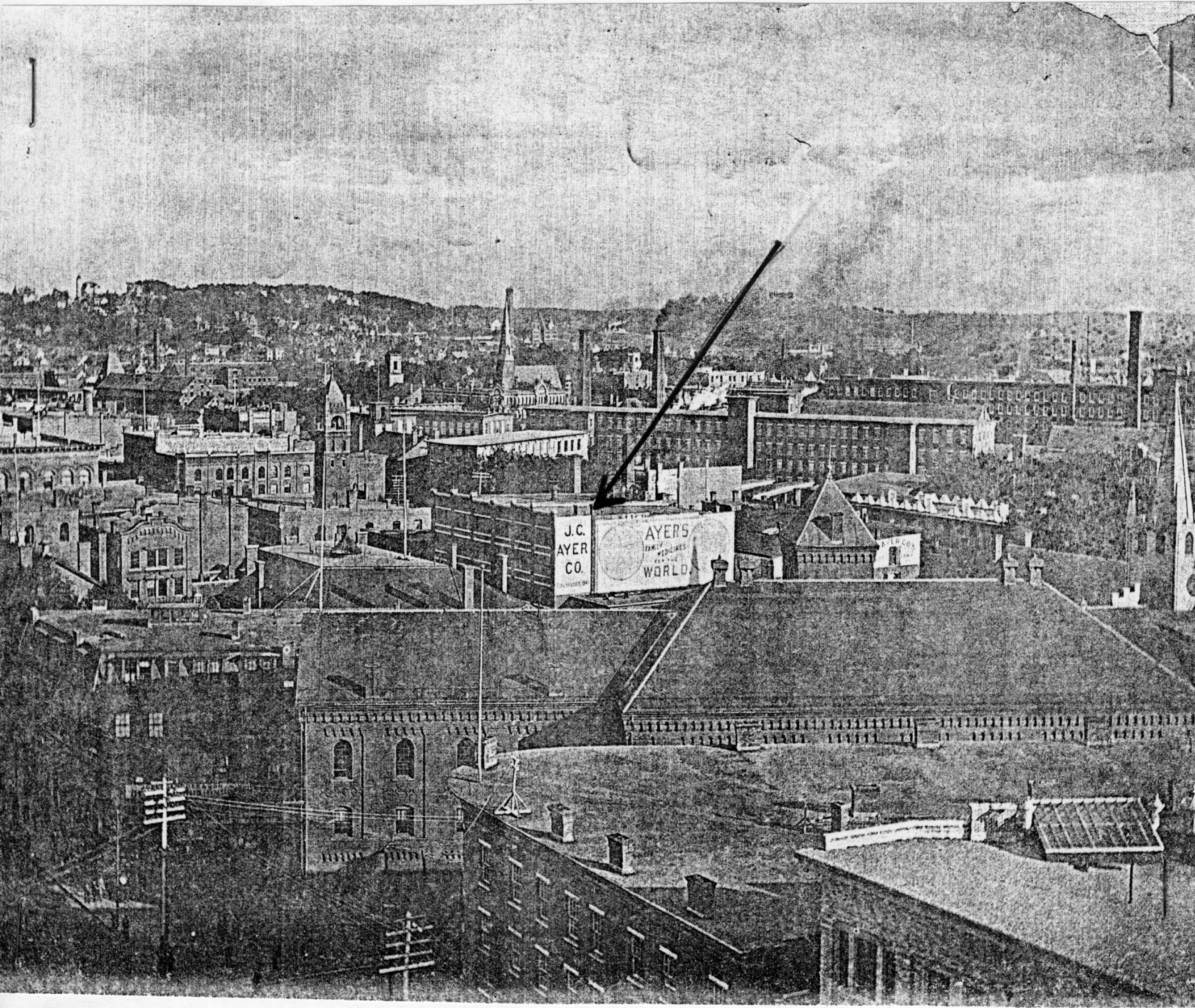


Figure 2

U. of Lowell Library, photo file, "Panoramas."