

City of Madison Landmarks Commission
LANDMARKS AND LANDMARK SITES NOMINATION FORM (1)

Name of Building or Site

Common

Historic (if applicable)

Wakeley-Giles Building

Location

Street Address

117-119 E. Mifflin Street

Aldermanic District

Second

Classification

Type of Property (building, monument, park, etc.)

building

Zoning District

C4

Present Use

commercial

Current Owner of Property (available at City Assessor's office)

Name(s)

Meselesh Ayele and James and Linda Ray

Street Address

117 E. Mifflin Street
Madison, WI 53703

Telephone Number

Legal Description (available at City Assessor's office)

Parcel Number

0709-133-3010-9

Legal Description

Original Plat SW 26 1/3 feet of NE
88 feet of Lot 2 & SW 26 1/3 feet of
NW 33 feet of NE 88 feet of Lot 3,
Block 101

Condition of Property

Physical Condition (excellent, good, fair, deteriorated, ruins)

very good

Altered or Unaltered?

altered

Moved or Original Site?

original site

Wall Construction

frame with brick veneer

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LANDMARKS AND LANDMARK SITES NOMINATION FORM (2)

Describe Present and Original Physical Construction and Appearance.

The Wakeley-Giles commercial building is a three-story frame vernacular commercial building with a painted brick veneer. It has a rectangular shape with a small two-story addition at the rear. On one side of the building is a party wall with the adjoining building; on the other side, a small space exists between buildings. A tall parapet covers the original gable roof of the building. This parapet was made larger using different bricks than that of the original brick veneer. And, the first floor storefront was also re-veneered with bricks unlike those of the original veneer. The building was built around 1869 as a rental property. Because of the existing gable peak at the rear of the building and the fact that the property was originally a multiple dwelling, it is likely that the original structure was a simple rectangular house. But by 1885 it had received the original brick veneer and probably had its appearance as a commercial block.

There are few exterior details to this building. The eight symmetrically placed windows on the front facade and four windows of the rear addition are simple sash types decorated with segmental brick arches and stone sills supported on the front by tiny brackets. The original openings have been covered with modern aluminum storm-screen windows and a small segment of the arch has been filled in to make a square opening. The first floor front facade appears to have been altered in the early twentieth century. It features red brick pilaster strips between the show windows and doors. These strips have concrete separating the first and second floors, accenting the storefront.

The interior of the building has almost been completely altered. The first floor has dark wood paneling and false ceilings. Original interior windows can be seen at the rear of the store, along with an old service elevator unit. The second story has also had dropped ceilings installed and paneling placed along the walls. This floor is divided up into small rooms. The third floor is much like the second, but in one area, which has decayed, the original nineteenth century interior of plain plastered walls and plain woodwork on windows and doors can be seen.

While much of this building is altered from its mid-nineteenth century state, its exterior has the appearance it did during the period of significance, when it was primarily a printing plant and the offices of an important Norwegian-American writer and newspaper.

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Original Owner Charles F. Wakeley	Original Use rental-residential
Architect or Builder unknown	Architectural Style commercial vernacular
Date of Construction ca. 1869	Indigenous Materials Used None

List of Bibliographical References Used

Anderson, Rasmus B. (with Albert O. Barton). Life Story of Rasmus B. Anderson. Madison: Rasmus B. Anderson, 1915.

Curti, Merle, and Vernon Carstensen. The University of Wisconsin A History, Vol. I. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1949.

Dictionary of Wisconsin Biography. Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1960.

Madison City directories, Library, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, WI.

Tax Rolls for the City of Madison, Preservation Planners Office, City of Madison, Wisconsin.

Wyatt, Barbara, Ed. Cultural Resource Management in Wisconsin, Vol. I. Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1986, Settlement.

Form Prepared By:

Name and Title

Carol Lohry Cartwright and Katherine Rankin

Organization Represented (if any)

City of Madison

Address

P. O. Box 2985
Madison, WI 57301-2985

Telephone Number

266-6552

Date Nomination Form Was Prepared

August 9, 1993

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Significance of Nominated Property and Conformance to Designation Criteria:

The Wakeley-Giles commercial building is significant as the place of publication for a small, important Norwegian-American newspaper between 1911 and 1922. It is also significant because it was the office of R. B. Anderson, editor of the Norwegian-American newspaper, Amerika, and one of the most important Norwegian-American citizens in the area during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Norwegians were an important ethnic immigrant group in Wisconsin in the nineteenth century. Settlement of Norwegians occurred throughout the state, but especially in the southern and western regions of Wisconsin. Dane County was at the center of early settlement of Norwegians and many prominent Norwegian-American leaders lived in the area. The Norwegian immigrants had a lively and extensive Norwegian-language press, and there were ethnic newspapers in virtually all the major centers of Norwegian population in the state in the nineteenth and early twentieth century.¹

Historical Background

Prior to the occupancy of Rasmus B. Anderson and his paper, Amerika, the Wakeley-Giles commercial building was a rental-residential property. Probably built as a house in or around 1869, it was probably converted to a commercial block around 1880-1882 by having a brick veneer placed around it. It was owned until the late 1870s by attorney Charles Wakeley, although there is no indication it was his office or his residence. In fact, it appears that it was built as a rental unit and occupied by residential tenants until the turn of the century. H. H. Giles owned the building from the late 1870s until around 1898, but he too never occupied the building. But around 1911 the building became primarily commercial. On the first floor was the print shop of Tracy Gibbs & Co., a printer and publisher of textbooks. On the second floor were residential tenants, and on the third floor was Anderson's office and the office of his paper, Amerika, and the Amerika Publishing Company. R. B.'s son, George, also had an office in the building. George worked with Rasmus on a number of ventures. R.B.'s private company, the Wisconsin Rubber Company, was also listed at this address. The make-up of this building remained the same until 1922. In 1922, Anderson no longer appeared at this address in the directories. Probably retired, neither the paper nor an office for Anderson appears in subsequent directories. The building was completely taken over by the Tracy and Kilgore Printing Company and owned by the Kilgore family. This printing company, later known as the Kilgore Printing Company, occupied the building until the early 1970s when William Wiedholz purchased the building for his decorating business. The building currently houses a restaurant.²

Historical Significance

The Wakeley-Giles commercial building derives its significance from the era when it was an office for Ramus B. Anderson and his Norwegian-language newspaper, Amerika. The building is one of only a few resources still extant that represent Anderson's prominent career as a writer, university professor, innovator in the field of Scandinavian

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studies, and political force in the Norwegian-American community in the area. It is also the only extant resource associated with Anderson's workplace after he left the University of Wisconsin in 1883, and the only extant resource linked with the publication of Amerika.

That Norwegian-Americans in general, and persons like Anderson in particular, have significance in Wisconsin history is discussed in Wisconsin's Cultural Resource Management Plan. While the entire state was a settlement area for Norwegian immigrants, the southern and western areas of the state had the greatest concentration of Norwegian settlements. Dane County, especially, had large settlements of Norwegians. In fact, by 1900, according to information in the Plan, 25 percent of the Norwegians in the United States lived in the state of Wisconsin. According to the Plan, the first Norwegian-American newspaper was published at Muskego, Wisconsin in 1847. Soon, there were many more Norwegian-American papers in all major centers of Norwegian population in the state. Between 1865 and 1914, there appeared 565 Norwegian-American papers and magazines. While not as much is known about the influence of these papers on the Norwegian-American public as would be liked, it is known that they probably played an active role in perpetuating Norwegian-American traditions, or formulating and promoting Norwegian-American opinion.³

Rasmus B. Anderson used his paper, Amerika, primarily as a means to promote certain political opinions. At the time he began Amerika, Anderson had already had a distinguished career. He was born in Albion, Wisconsin to a family who made the first Norwegian emigration to America. Anderson attended Luther College in Iowa, but was expelled for leading student protests there in 1865. In 1866 he taught at Albion Academy and in 1869 became an instructor in modern languages at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. He promoted the inclusion of Norwegian in the language program, and in 1875 he was given the first professorship of Scandinavian languages at the UW and in the country. While he was not an innovative scholar in the subject, he did write extensively about Scandinavian issues and edited a number of works. In 1883 he left the university to pursue business interests, but in 1885 he was appointed ambassador to Denmark, a post he served until 1889. He carried on his business interests after this and in 1898 began his association with Amerika.⁴

In his autobiography, Anderson states that his association with a newspaper came about because of the political conflicts in the Republican party between John C. Spooner and his forces and Robert M. LaFollette and his supporters. LaFollette had garnered the support of Skandinaven, the most widely circulated Norwegian paper in the United States. Anderson, who was allied with Spooner, was encouraged to begin a newspaper to support the political opinions of the Spooner group and present them to the Norwegian-American community. Amerika was a newspaper that had begun in 1884 in Chicago. It was a financial loss and in 1896 moved to Madison where it did not thrive either. Spooner and his supporters helped raise the money to purchase the paper for Anderson, and in 1898 Anderson began to edit and write for Amerika. The paper was moderately successful and Anderson continued to publish it until 1922.⁵

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While Anderson edited Amerika he was also engaged in business. One of his investments was the Wisconsin Rubber Company, organized in 1904 to develop rubber plantations in Mexico. At first a success, during the Mexican Revolution the price of rubber dropped off considerably, and turmoil in Mexico caused problems in shipping the product. In fact, the company was going to be sold for a large profit to an English firm right before the revolution, a deal that fell through. Anderson was also active in the insurance business, and he stated in his 1915 autobiography that he spent most of his days between his office and his home. His office in 1915 was in the Wakeley-Giles commercial building, and had been since about 1911. Prior to that both the newspaper and his office was at 123 E. Washington Avenue (demolished). Anderson maintained his office at 117-119 E. Mifflin Street until 1922, when he presumably retired.⁶

Ramus Anderson was, without a doubt, one of the most important Norwegian-Americans in Wisconsin. His most significant work was done at the University of Wisconsin, where he championed the inclusion of Scandinavian studies into the curriculum there. His best writing also took place during that era. But his later years, after 1883, were not without significance. His political relationship with John C. Spooner spawned the development of a revitalized Amerika, an ethnic newspaper that reflected the views of Anderson and attempted to form Norwegian-American opinion to that of Anderson and his political friends. Because this building is the only extant resource associated with Anderson's ethnic newspaper, Amerika, it is historically significant. And, while the University of Wisconsin is still an extant resource associated with Anderson, his long-time home at 316 N. Carroll Street is no longer extant. So, of the the two places Anderson said in his 1915 autobiography that he spent his time, only one exists today, this building. And, the exterior changes that occurred to the building over the nineteenth century were probably all in place during Anderson's tenure there, making the building alterations on the exterior contribute to its significance.

Notes

1. Barbara Wyatt, Ed., Cultural Resource Management in Wisconsin, Vol. I, Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1986, pp. Settlement 5-1--5-9.
2. Tax Rolls, Madison City Directories, Library, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin.
3. Wyatt, pp. Settlement 5-1--5-9.
4. Dictionary of Wisconsin Biography, Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1960, pp. 11-12; Merle Curti and Vernon Carstensen, The University of Wisconsin A History, Vol. I, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1949, pp. 340-343.
5. Rasmus B. Anderson (with Albert O. Barton), Life Story of Rasmus B. Anderson, Madison: Rasmus B. Anderson, 1915, pp. 574-575.
6. Ibid., pp. 576-577, 662.