HISTORIC RESOURCES COMMISSION OF ASHEVILLE AND BUNCOMBE COUNTY
LOCAL DESIGNATION REPORT

SAWYER MOTOR COMPANY BUILDING
100 COXE AVENUE
ASHEVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA

PREPARED BY

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Local Landmark Designation Report

SAWYER MOTOR COMPANY BUILDING
Asheville, Buncombe County

1. NAME AND LOCATION OF PROPERTY

The Sawyer Motor Company Building is located at 100 Coxe Avenue. The building is situated on the southeast corner of the intersection of Coxe Avenue and Hilliard Street.

2. NAME AND ADDRESS OF CURRENT PROPERTY OWNERS

See the attached list of owners.

3. REPRESENTATIVE PHOTOGRAPHS AND MAPS OF THE PROPERTY

Representative photographs of the property, location map, aerial map, and property survey are included with this report.

4. CURRENT DEED BOOK REFERENCE

Since 2001, the Sawyer Motor Company Building has been rehabilitated and developed as condominiums and commercial space. Deed book references and tax parcel numbers for the individual units are shown on the attached owner list.

The property was last recorded as a single property in Buncombe County Deed Book 2404, page 467, on January 18, 2001. The recorded property encompassed the entire 0.63-acre tract associated with the Sawyer Motor Company Building, including Lots 30, 31, 32, and 33, Block C, shown on a plat of "Property of T. C. Coxe Estate" dated November 1926 (Plat book 12, page 84).

5. AD VALOREM TAX APPRAISAL

The total assessed tax value for the twenty-three individual ownership components of the Sawyer Motor Company Building is $6,066,600.00. The attached owner list shows assessments for each of the individual units.

6. DATE OF CONSTRUCTION

The Sawyer Motor Company Building was constructed 1925-26.

7. HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Areas of Significance	Architecture Commerce
Period(s) of Significance	1925-26

8. STATEMENT OF SIGNFICANCE

The Sawyer Motor Company Building on Coxe Avenue is one of the most intact surviving automobile dealership buildings in downtown Asheville from the early twentieth century. Coxe Avenue, which was not created until the early 1920s, was advertised as the city's automobile business district with a number of showrooms, service stations, and related automotive businesses located on the street. Increased automobile production and ownership in the first part of the twentieth century brought profound changes to the country's economic and cultural landscape, including a range of new building types directly associated with the automobile. Eugene C. Sawyer, who claimed to have sold over 5,000 cars during his career, was the first automobile dealer in Asheville, selling his first automobile in 1903. He later founded the Sawyer Motor Company and in October 1925, moved the business into its new quarters at 100 Coxe Avenue, which provided for an enlarged showroom, garage, and service center.

9. ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

The Sawyer Motor Company occupies the southeast corner of the intersection of Coxe Avenue and Hilliard Street in the southwestern part of downtown Asheville. Coxe Avenue, which is fifty feet wide between curbs with eight-foot sidewalks, was created in the mid-1920s when E. W. Grove filled the deep ravine that existed between Patton and Southside avenues to the north and south. From its initial development Coxe Avenue was promoted as the "Automobile Traffic Center" of Asheville, both as a commercial district easily accessible by car and for the concentration of related automotive businesses located on the street. The ample parking and generously proportioned lots were considered ideal for large showrooms and repair shops. Coxe Avenue did indeed become the center of the automotive trade in Asheville with no less than five major dealerships located on the street, along with numerous related businesses. Although no longer home to many automobile related businesses, several of the large showroom buildings still stand on Coxe Avenue and the street retains the spaciousness advertised at the time of its initial development.

Exterior Description

Begun in April 1925 and completed in 1926 with the addition of the upper two stories, the Sawyer Motor Company Building is a four-story, concrete and steel-

frame commercial building faced with dark red brick and trimmed with cast concrete. The trapezoidal plan building has its northwest corner, facing the intersection of Coxe Avenue and Hilliard Street, cut at a forty-five degree angle and a projecting bay at the northeast corner along Hilliard Street. A short driveway adjacent to the east side of the building leads to a second level garage door opening. An exterior stair tower, constructed in 2001 and faced with metal panels, is located in the interior corner of the east elevation. The south and east elevations away from the street are unfaced concrete and structural clay tile. The east elevation contains regularly-spaced single, double, and triple sections of metal frame industrial sash with awning windows. The openings are framed with brick sills, soldier course lintels, and quoins on the sides. On the south elevation, first-floor openings have been fitted with replacement aluminum-frame window and door units sheltered by cloth awnings. A curving corner stair and handicap-accessible ramp have been added for access to the commercial space. A garage opening at the southeast corner of the building has been reconfigured as a recessed pedestrian entrance. Windows on the upper floors of the south elevation are irregularly-spaced arrangements of metal frame industrial sash with both casement and awning windows. The openings are framed by brick sills and soldier course lintels. A rising stepped parapet in the center of the elevation marks the ramp enclosure as it opened on the roof of the building.

The street elevations of the building are divided vertically in the bays of irregular sizes by brick pilasters. Each bay contains triple or single sections of metal frame industrial sash with awning windows on each floor. The first floor contains aluminum-frame display windows with cast concrete lintels on the Coxe Avenue side. The entrance bay includes replacement doors topped by a patinaed copper canopy support by four large chains and a multi-light, leaded glass transom. A paneled wood garage door at the southwest corner remains intact but is no longer functioning. Spandrels between each floor of the Coxe Avenue elevation and three bays of the Hilliard Street elevation display patterned brick with decorative cast concrete inserts. A cast concrete string course separates the third and fourth floors. An ornamental parapet with a cast concrete coping and pendants tops the façade sections. At the center of the Coxe Avenue elevation is a cast concrete name plaque and arched ornamental parapet. Another cast concrete name plaque is located in the corner parapet.

A smaller commercial space is located at the northeast corner of the building and is accessed from Hilliard Street. The double-leaf entrance is topped by a ten-light parapet and flanked by a large display window with a multi-light, leaded glass transom.

Interior Description

The interior of the Sawyer Motor Company Building is divided into three distinct sections: commercial space on the first floor, garage on the second floor, and residential condominium units on the third and fourth stories. While most of the commercial and residential floors have been thoroughly renovated, the garage

level remains the most intact. The garage level, which is entered through a short driveway of Hilliard Street and doorway at the east end of the building, is a single open space with a poured concrete floor, interrupted only by two rows of octagonal concrete columns. The concrete framing, concrete beams, pipes, electrical conduit, and ductwork are all exposed. Parking spaces for the residential units are located on the garage level and each space also includes a freestanding wood fame and wire storage unit.

The commercial area on the first floor is a modern arrangement of partitioned offices, conference rooms, work spaces, and lobby areas built around the octagonal concrete supports that continue from the garage level above. The original office space, located in the center of the original open floor plan, has been incorporated into the design of the modern offices with a few moldings remaining in place. The concrete beams and underside of the concrete floor above are exposed overhead, as are all of the mechanical systems. The four showroom windows along the south façade have been replaced with modern door and window units. A large opening at the southeast corner of the building, originally a garage door for the first level, has been converted into a recessed secondary entrance. The main entrance from Coxe Avenue opens into an enclosed lobby with elevator and stairwell that only serves the residential areas of the building.

The residential areas on the third and fourth floors contain ten condominium units on each floor. The floor plan is defined by a central corridor that runs east-west from the front elevator and stair to the rear stairwell with five units located on both the north and south sides of the corridor. Three two-bedroom units are located in the southwest, northwest, and northeast corner of each floor, while the remaining units are one bedroom. Concrete and steel structural beams and the underside of the concrete floors above are exposed overhead, as are pipes and ducts, on the residential floors, although the concrete floor has been covered with salvaged pine flooring.

10. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

During the mid-1920s, local businessman E. W. Grove, who made his name in Asheville with the Grove Park Inn, began developing Coxe Avenue after purchasing and demolishing the old Battery Park Hotel downtown. Grove subsequently leveled the hill where the old hotel stood and used the displaced earth to fill a deep ravine, thereby creating a gentle grade from Patton Avenue at the north end to Southside Avenue. The Asheville Citizen reported that one million cubic yards of dirt were removed from the Battery Park Hill at a cost of $250,000.[1]

The new Coxe Avenue was designed as a thoroughly modern street fifty feet wide between curbs with eight-foot sidewalks on either side. No electric street car

[1] *Asheville Citizen* (August 24, 1924). David R. Black, *Historic Architectural Resources of Downtown Asheville, North Carolina* (Asheville, NC: City of Asheville and North Carolina Division of Archives and History, 1979), 8-9.

lines were permitted, but a new transit terminal accommodated city buses. Construction of Coxe Avenue continued through the summer of 1924, and the E. W. Grove Investments company promoted its lots on the west side of the street into the fall of 1925. Grove's company actively touted Coxe Avenue as the automotive business district of Asheville. Questions arose about the stability of the Coxe Avenue fill, which Grove answered in a large newspaper advertisement assuring potential investors that "the best architects and foundation engineers in the county" had inspected the fill and proclaimed it fine for structures up to five stories in height without the use of concrete piles.[2]

The Sawyer Motor Company was the first automobile dealer to announce plans to build a new showroom and garage facility on Coxe Avenue, and in September 1924, signed contract for a $100,000 building to begin construction in spring of the following year. Eugene C. Sawyer (1871-1966), president of the Sawyer Motor Company, was the earliest automobile dealer in Asheville, selling his first car in 1903. Like many of the earliest automobile salesmen, Sawyer previously worked in a related industry as the proprietor of the Asheville Cycle Company, a bicycle sales and repair shop. He sold two automobiles in 1903, including a White touring car to Tench Coxe, and three more cars in 1904. Sawyer sold his last bicycle in 1907, and reorganized his business as the Asheville Automobile Company. He sold seventeen cars in 1908 and thirty-three in 1909. Around 1918 the Sawyer Motor Company was formed with its showroom at 18-20 Church Street.[3]

An Asheville native, Sawyer enthusiastically promoted the new mode of transportation. In 1899, he was fortunate to not only see a motor vehicle—a Locomobile steamer—but also test drive the contraption. Sawyer claimed to have hand-built a gasoline powered vehicle the following year, which he later sold to Rutherford P. Hayes (son of former president Rutherford B. Hayes) and purchased the first production automobile in North Carolina in January 1902. Among Sawyer's wealthy customers, George W. Vanderbilt, owner of Biltmore House, purchased a Chalmers vehicle from Sawyer in 1909 and bought a second in 1910. As a result of his business with Vanderbilt one of Sawyer's employees, Raymond Plemmons, who Sawyer taught to drive, left to work as George Vanderbilt's chauffeur.[4]

Construction on the Sawyer Motor Company Building began in April 1925. V. W. Breese & Company Engineers of Charlotte designed the two-story, reinforced-concrete building, which was touted as "one of the most modern automobile agency and garage buildings" in western North Carolina. The contract was let to the L. L. Merchant Construction Company of Asheville for $90,000, with the building ready for occupancy in five months. One of the interesting features of the

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[2] *Asheville Citizen* (August 10, 1924; September 28, 1924; and August 18, 1925).
[3] Robert E. Ireland, *Entering the Auto Age: the early automobile in North Carolina, 1900-1930* (Raleigh, NC: North Carolina Division of Archives and History, 1990), 5-7 & 33-38; and Asheville City Directories.
[4] Ireland, 5-7 & 33; *Asheville Times* (April 18, 1941); *Asheville Citizen* (October 15, 1965).

60,000 square foot building was that the use of the roof—accessed by an interior ramp—for an additional 15,000 square feet of parking.[5]

The Webb Motor Company, the local Buick agency, along with the affiliated Webb Tire Company, was the first dealership to occupy a new showroom on Coxe Avenue. Located at the northeast corner of Coxe Avenue and Hilliard Street, the company opened on August 1, 1925. B & B Motor Company, a Chevrolet dealership opened a new showroom on August 15, 1925, just north of the Webb agency. In addition to the Sawyer Motor Company, which moved into its new building in October 1925, two other major auto showrooms were constructed on Coxe Avenue: the Richbourg Motor Company, erected in 1926, and the Conabeer Motor Company, completed in 1928.[6]

The Sawyer Motor Company continued to occupy the building on Coxe Avenue until the early 1940s, when the business moved to South Lexington Avenue. By the time Eugene Sawyer retired from the business in 1956, he estimated that he had sold some 5,000 automobiles, most of them from the Sawyer Motor Company Building. Around 1942, the Matthews Motor Company moved into the building and sold Ford, Lincoln, and Mercury cars from this location until 1960. The building sat vacant for a couple of years before it was occupied by the Skyland Oldsmobile Company around 1963. From the mid-1970s until 2001, the building has also housed the Coleman Tire Company and Precision International Foreign Car Service, an auto repair business.

Architectural Context

The 1920s boom in Asheville's population and real estate also created a similar boom in the sales and ownership of automobiles. Registration of cars and trucks in North Carolina increased exponentially from 550 in 1905 to 3,220 in 1910 to an amazing 109,017 in 1919. By 1928, the number of automobile registrations in the state had jumped to 473, 623. The growth of the automobile business was reflected in an impressive number of new structures designed for their sales, maintenance, and storage. In Asheville, the greatest concentration of these buildings occurred on Coxe Avenue, which had been promoted as the city's "Automobile Traffic Center" after its construction. The major dealerships were centralized organizations with the agencies entire business conducted in one multi-story building. The first floor of these buildings contained the showroom and was lit by large display windows. Service facilities and storage areas were located on the upper stories that were accessed by elevators or ramps. Surface lots around the building provided additional storage space.[7]

The Sawyer Motor Company Building is one of three automobile showrooms that remain standing on Coxe Avenue. It is also one of the largest intact industrial

[5] *Asheville Citizen* (March 22, 1925; April 2, 1925; and July 25, 1925); *Asheville Times* (July 28, 1929).
[6] *Asheville Citizen* (October 13, 1925), and Black, 55-56.
[7] David R. Black, et al., "Historic Resources of Downtown Asheville Multiple Resource Nomination," 1978; and Ireland, 58 & 87.

style buildings in downtown Asheville. Although the building has been recently renovated for commercial office space and condominiums, it retains a high degree of historic integrity, especially on the exterior. Most of the changes to the building occur on the interior and involve the partitioning of the previously open spaces. The second floor, however, remains a parking garage, serving the residents of the building.

Four automobile showrooms were listed in the National Register of Historic Places as part of the Downtown Asheville Multiple Resource Nomination. The Richbourg Motor Company building, designed by Albert C. Wirth for Tench Coxe in 1926, however, has been demolished. The building was an imposing, three-story, brick-faced structure with plate glass and industrial windows topped by shallow limestone arches.

The B & B Motor Company building (and adjacent Webb Motor Company) on the northeast corner of Coxe Avenue and Hilliard Street is a two-story brick structure with stone string courses. The south section contains a limestone coping with stubby finials and the north section includes an overhanging stone modillion cornice. The building, however, was renovated in the 1990s for modern office facilities, including replacement windows and doors throughout.

The Conabeer Motors Building at the south end of Coxe Avenue also survives largely intact. Designed by the architectural firm of Beacham and LeGrand of Greenville, South Carolina, for Tench Coxe in 1928, the three-story brick and steel building with limestone accents was leased to the Conabeer Chrysler agency. Presently vacant, the building was later used as furniture store and contains added interior office partitions on the first floor.

Two other related buildings survive on Coxe Avenue including the Koon garage on the southwest corner of Coxe Avenue and Hilliard Street opposite the Sawyer Motor Company Building. The two-story brick garage building has been substantially altered with a one-story addition occupying the corner where a Koon Oil Company filling station once stood. The Art Deco style Asheville Transfer and Storage Company Warehouse, built ca. 1930, stands at the south end of Coxe Avenue. The three-story reinforced concrete building with a brick and limestone façade was designed by V. W. Breese of Charlotte, architect of the Sawyer Motor Company Building.

II. PROPERTY INCLUDED IN THE DESIGNATION

The property included in the designation is limited to the exterior facades of the Sawyer Motor Company Building. Few interior elements, with the exception of some concrete structural systems, remain intact and visible due, in part, to the recent commercial and residential rehabilitation of the building.

12. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Asheville City Directories

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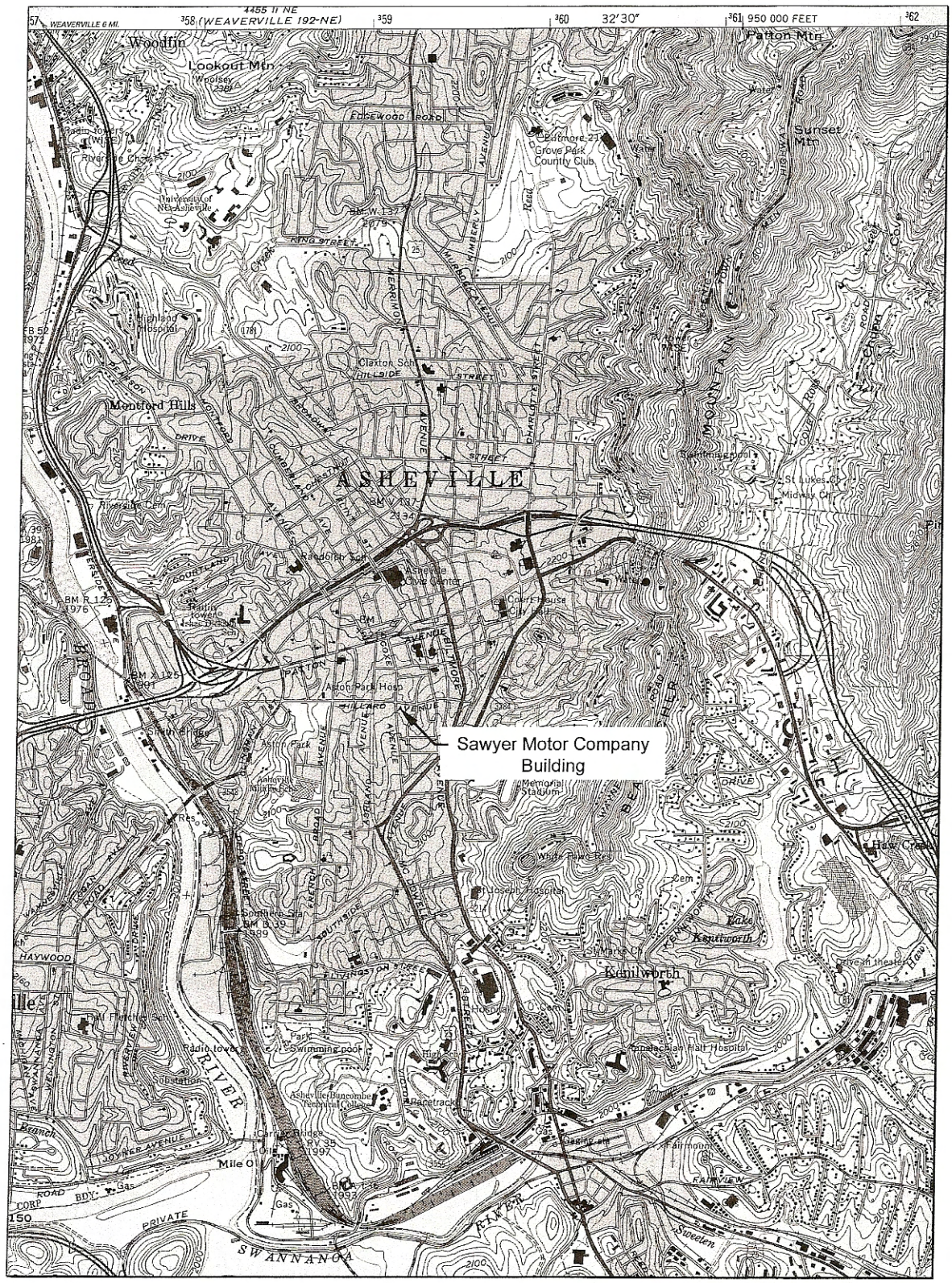
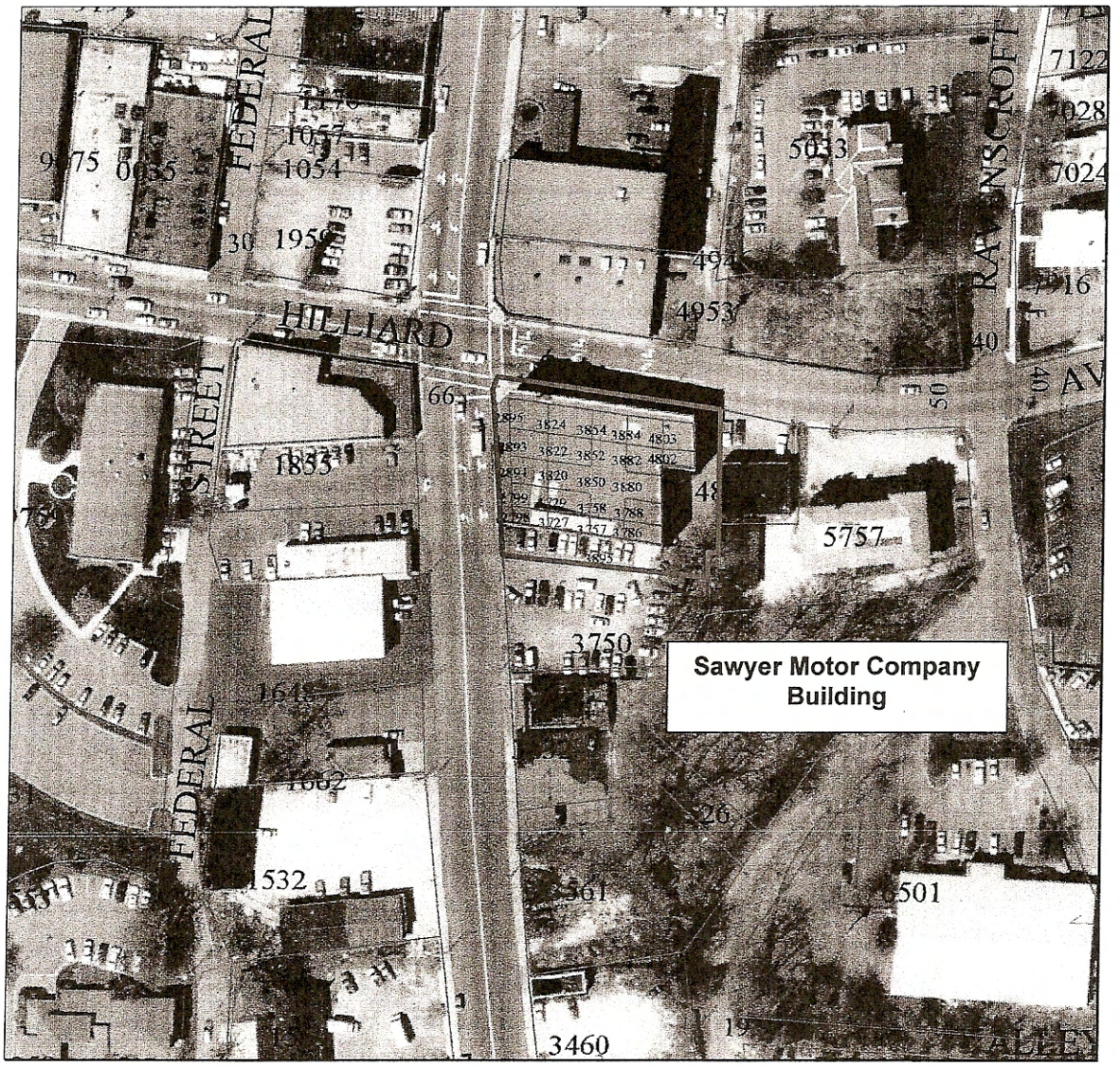
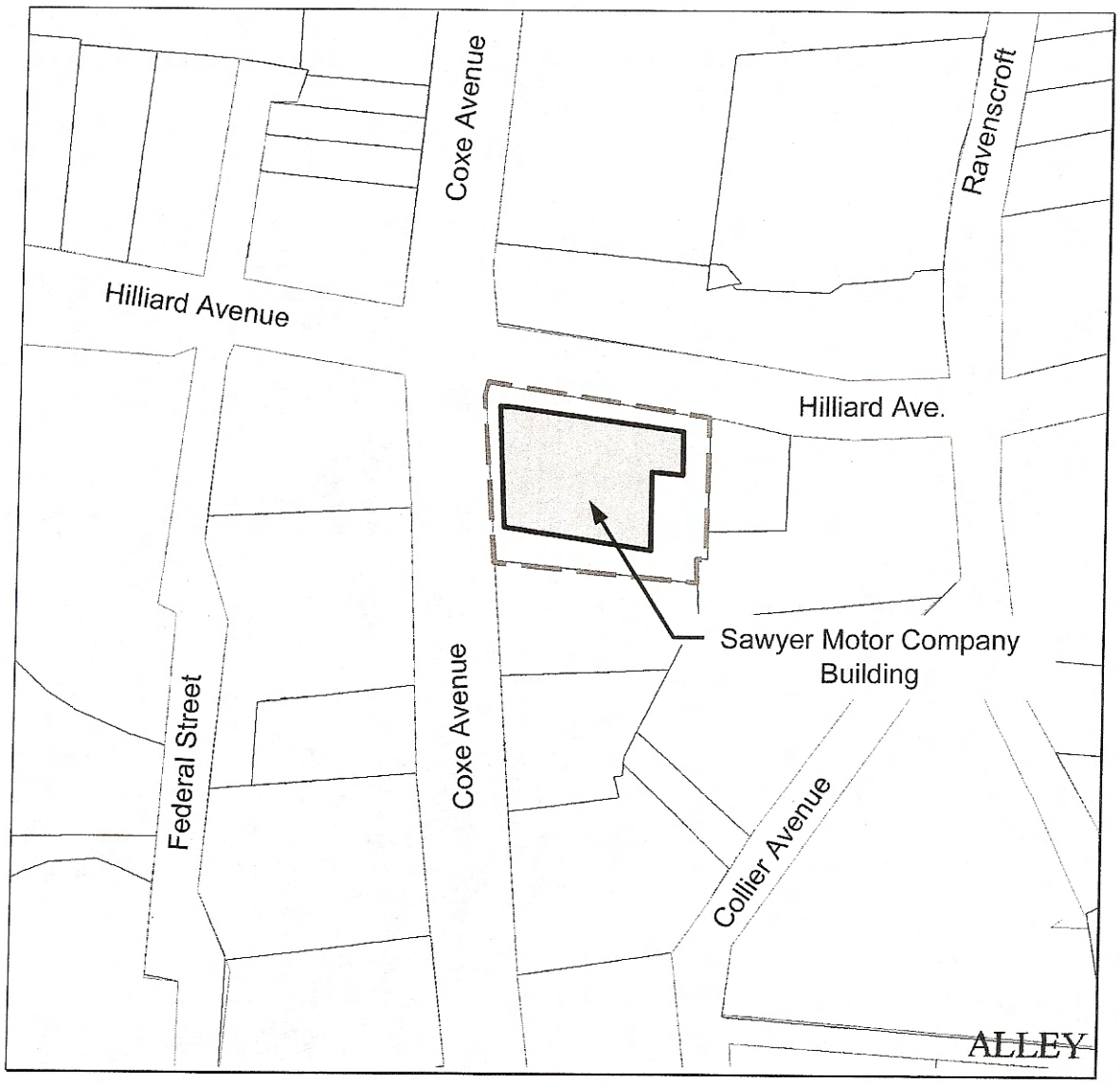


Asheville, 7.5' USGS topographic quadrangle map (1961; photorevised 1991)

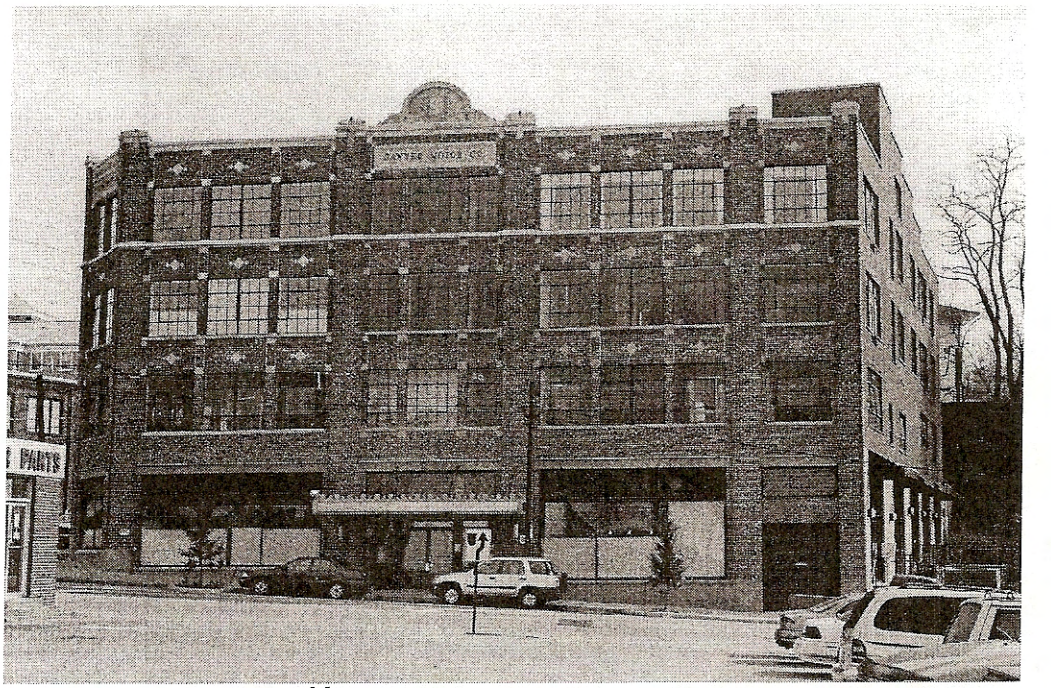


Sawyer Motor Company Building – Property Boundaries for Local Designation (approximate—see attached survey), Buncombe County Land Records Aerial Map, PIN:

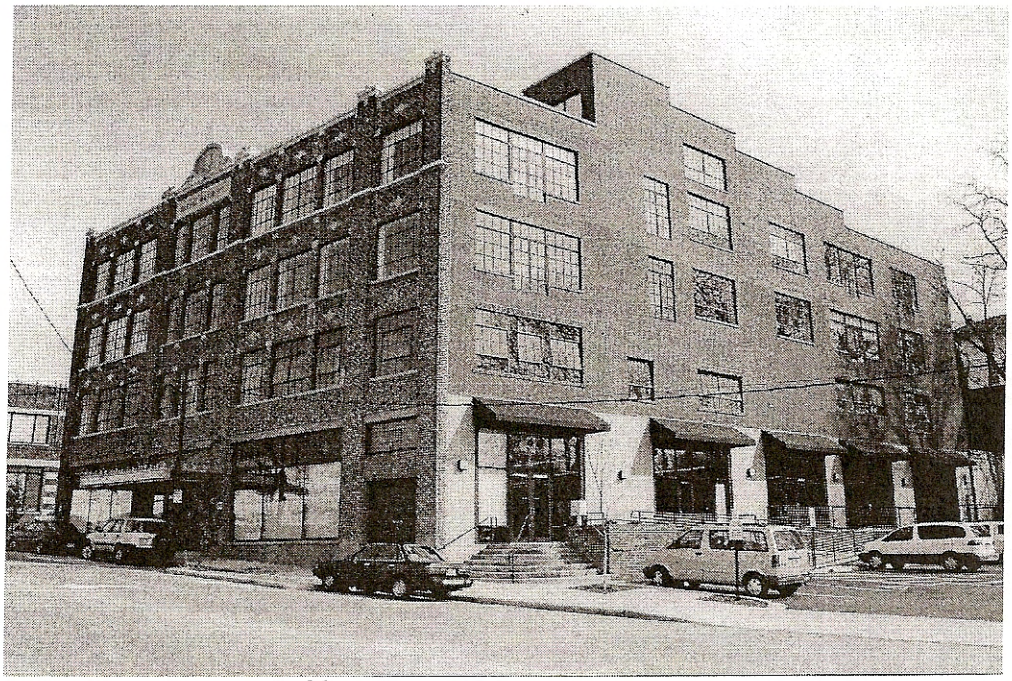


Sawyer Motor Company Building – Tax map, 0.63 acres, PIN: 9648-06-38-3851

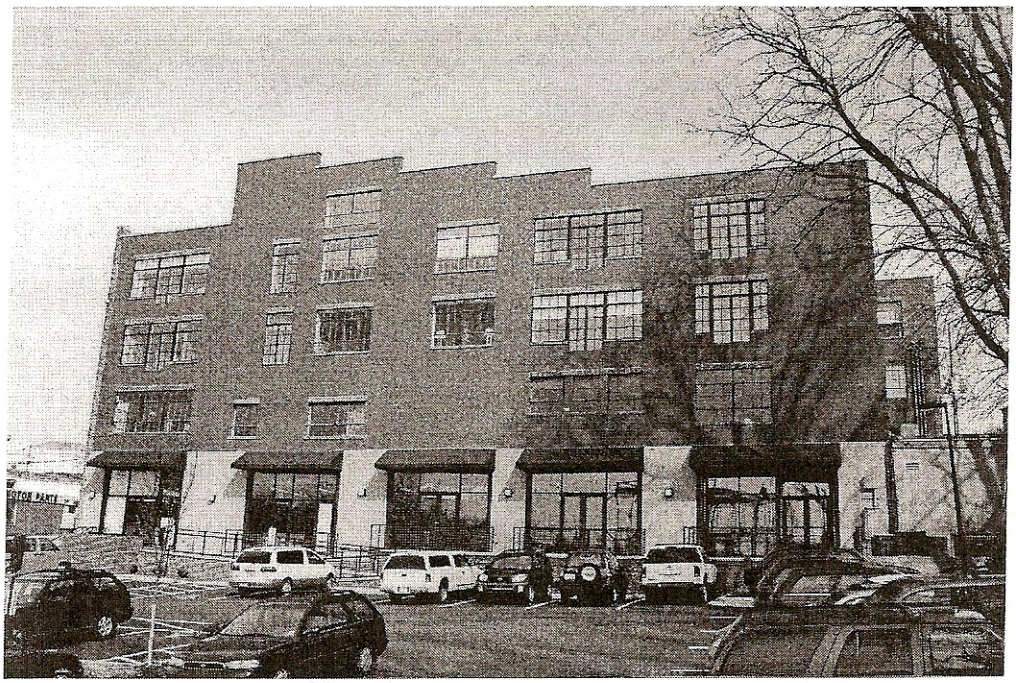
Sawyer Motor Company Building
100 Coxe Avenue, Asheville, NC
February 25, 2004
Oblique view to SE



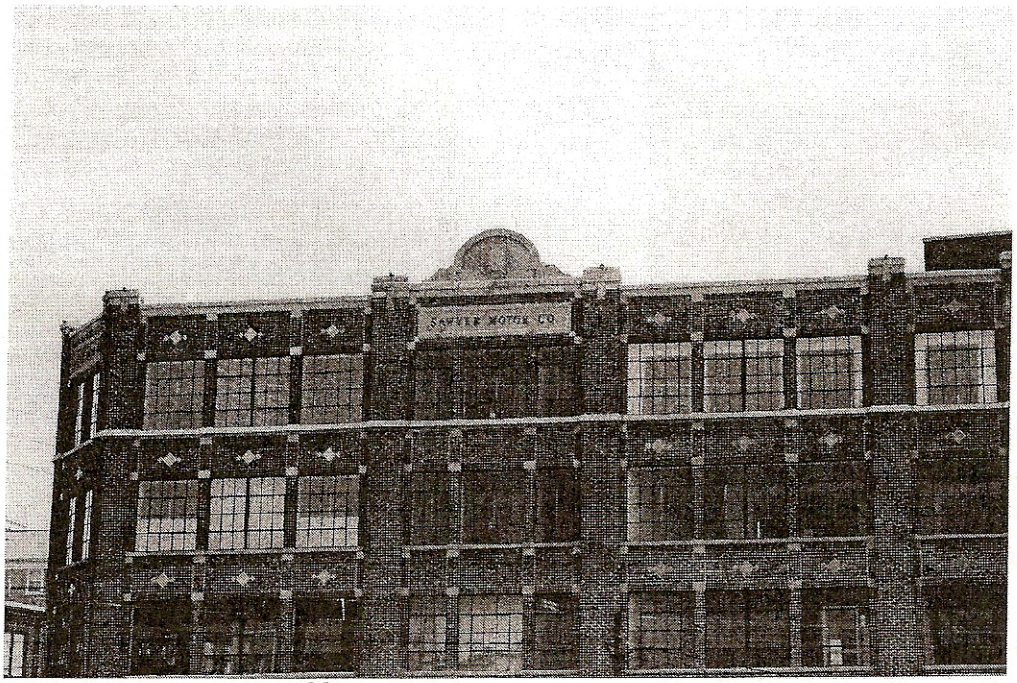
Sawyer Motor Company Building
100 Coxe Avenue, Asheville, NC
February 25, 2004
West (front) facade



Sawyer Motor Company Building
100 Coxe Avenue, Asheville, NC
February 25, 2004
Oblique view to NE

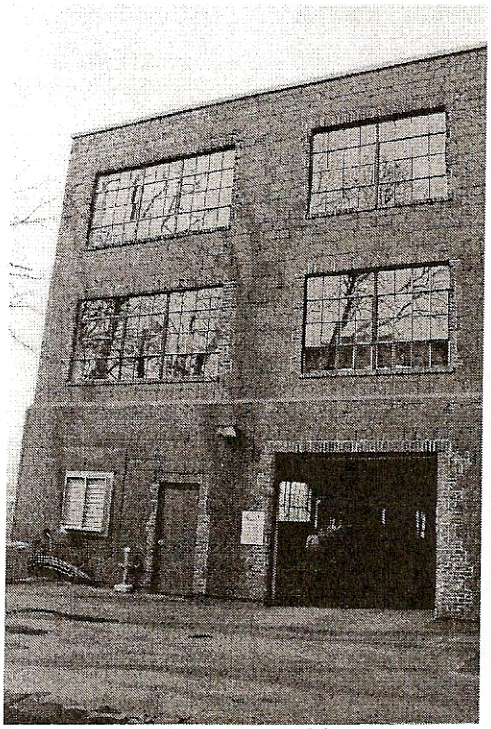


Sawyer Motor Company Building
100 Coxe Avenue, Asheville, NC
February 25, 2004
South facade

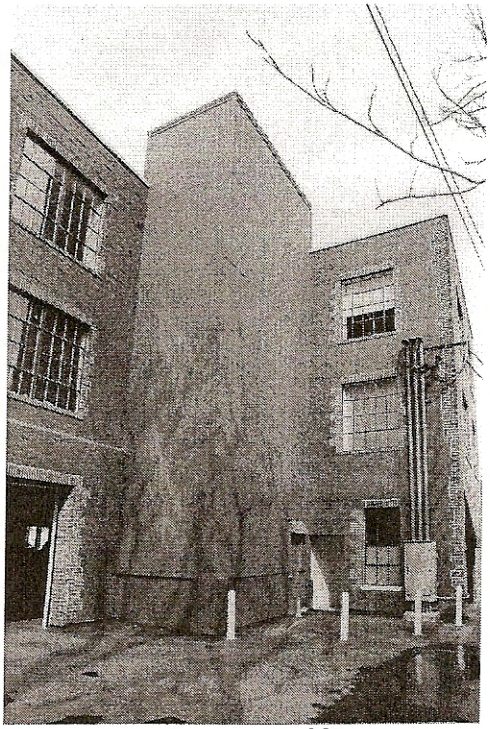


Sawyer Motor Company Building
100 Coxe Avenue, Asheville, NC
February 25, 2004
West (front) façade, upper story detail

Sawyer Motor Company Building
100 Coxe Avenue, Asheville, NC
February 25, 2004
North façade, view to SW



Sawyer Motor Company Building
100 Coxe Avenue, Asheville, NC
February 25, 2004
Rear (east) façade, view to W



Sawyer Motor Company Building
100 Coxe Avenue, Asheville, NC
February 25, 2004
Rear (east) façade, view to N