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THE BROAD SIDE

FROM THE WEST VIRGINIA HUMANITIES COUNCIL
STATE AFFILIATE OF THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

IN PLAIN SIGHT

THE BRIEF, BRILLIANT, CHANGING HISTORIES OF AN URBAN LOT

by Kyle Warmack
Program Officer



The bucket of a massive backhoe rears up from the rubble, trailing cables and bits of debris before dumping them into a growing pile of pulverized concrete and twisted metal—gone, the memories of another era, along with another piece of a famous architect's legacy.

The mangled wreckage reminds me that the path of history is never so linear as we would like it to be, nor the questions of preservation as straightforward as we might wish. In our current age, when nearly all new urban structures are built over the bones of something that came before, how do we know which landmarks are worth fighting for?

The demolition in question is at 3000 MacCorkle Avenue in South Charleston—part of the centuries-old Midland Trail that runs along present day Route 60—and the building was a gray, nondescript, one-story office built in the mid-1960s for a chemical company. Until recently, thousands of people passed it every day on their way to Kroger, Burger King, or Krispy Kreme in the shopping center across the street. By 2021 it is, perhaps, nothing to nobody.

However drab it may have seemed to some, its origins were anything but. The building was designed by Charleston-based modernist architect Henry Elden (1914-2009), who created over 800 post offices, schools, hospitals, university buildings, banks, offices, and more in a career spanning half a century. His buildings are scattered across at least thirty-seven West Virginia counties and range from big to small, such as the large activity center at Chief Logan State Park and the tiny chapel at Jackson's Mill near Weston. Elden's most famous work may have been his own house, Top-O-Rock, which was one of Charleston's most iconic structures until its tragic demolition in September 2015, despite a vigorous campaign from local citizens to save the beloved home.

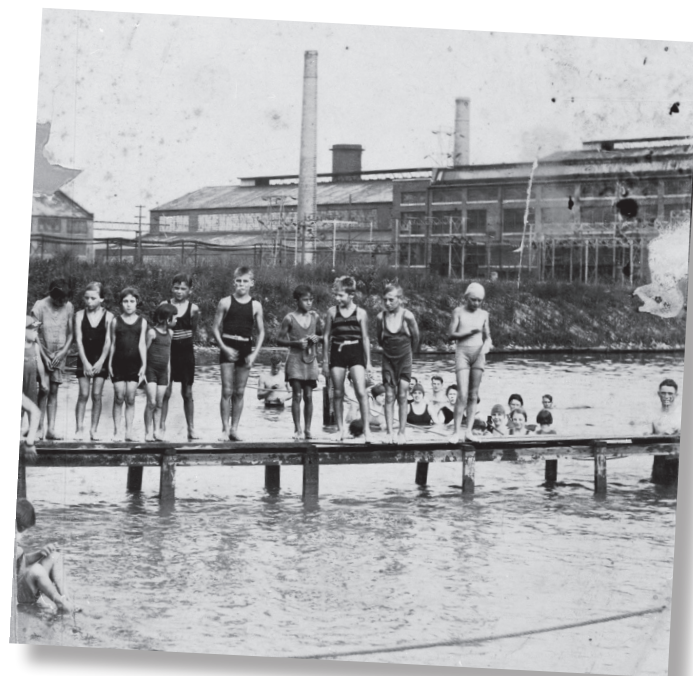
Before he became one of West Virginia's most prolific and celebrated architects, Elden worked in the structural department at Union Carbide chemical corporation immediately before and after World War II. During the war, he served in the U.S. Navy. In the mid-1960s, the Food Machinery and Chemical Corporation (FMC) needed a new office for a hundred employees of its Inorganic Chemicals division and tapped Elden to design the building, which subsequently opened on February 28, 1966. Today, the smashed remnants of Elden's work on MacCorkle Avenue are making way for a new retail center: hotels, big box stores, and parking lots.

It's easy to be nostalgic about the loss of something architecturally unique to the march of commercial development. Elden himself thought the building important enough to feature on promotional brochures that survive today in the State Archives. But Elden's building was itself constructed over the bulldozed remains of Bungalow Park, a small neighborhood of thirty-three wooden houses built to house workers for the abutting U.S. Naval Ordnance Plant (NOP), one of the nation's biggest naval production facilities from 1917 until its sale to FMC in 1961.

The houses of Bungalow backed up against the NOP's huge settling basin, a pond that fed Kanawha River water to the plant's giant steel quenching tanks and steam plant, and the children of workers frequently swam there under the watchful eyes of the NOP's U.S. Marine garrison. Today, construction vehicles swarm through the empty basin, filling in the 15-million gallon span where those children once played, geese and ducks congregated, and FMC's amphibious M113 armored personnel carriers were tested for watertightness before shipping off to war in Vietnam.

Across the street from Bungalow Park was Armor Park, where Riverwalk Mall now resides. Sixty-five houses were built of brick and stucco in 1918 for yet more NOP workers. These too were crushed under the bulldozer's treads in the late 1960s when FMC decided not to maintain them. Krispy Kreme occupies the old playground, and Burger King fills the site of Armor Park School.

Where massive dump trucks, caterpillars, and other earth movers are currently packing the dirt and gravel into a firm foundation underneath South Charleston's



future commercial sprawl, there once was a train roundhouse and stables for the huge Naval Ordnance Plant; those in turn were demolished for FMC's hydrogen peroxide plant and slush pond. How long now will this new retail megalopolis stand in their place before it, too, meets the wrecking ball?

Standing watch over these epochs of change are the surviving structures of the NOP: massive, imperturbable, and still bustling with industry. The former machine shop, for example—sixteen football fields in size—now houses Gestamp's auto parts manufacturing operation, and has been part of the car manufacturing scene since American Motors leased it in 1974, eventually giving way to Volkswagen, Mayflower, and several other independent operations. It and several other major buildings at the NOP are overlooked architectural treasures, the sole survivors of a rapidly changing century that has ground their brethren to dust.

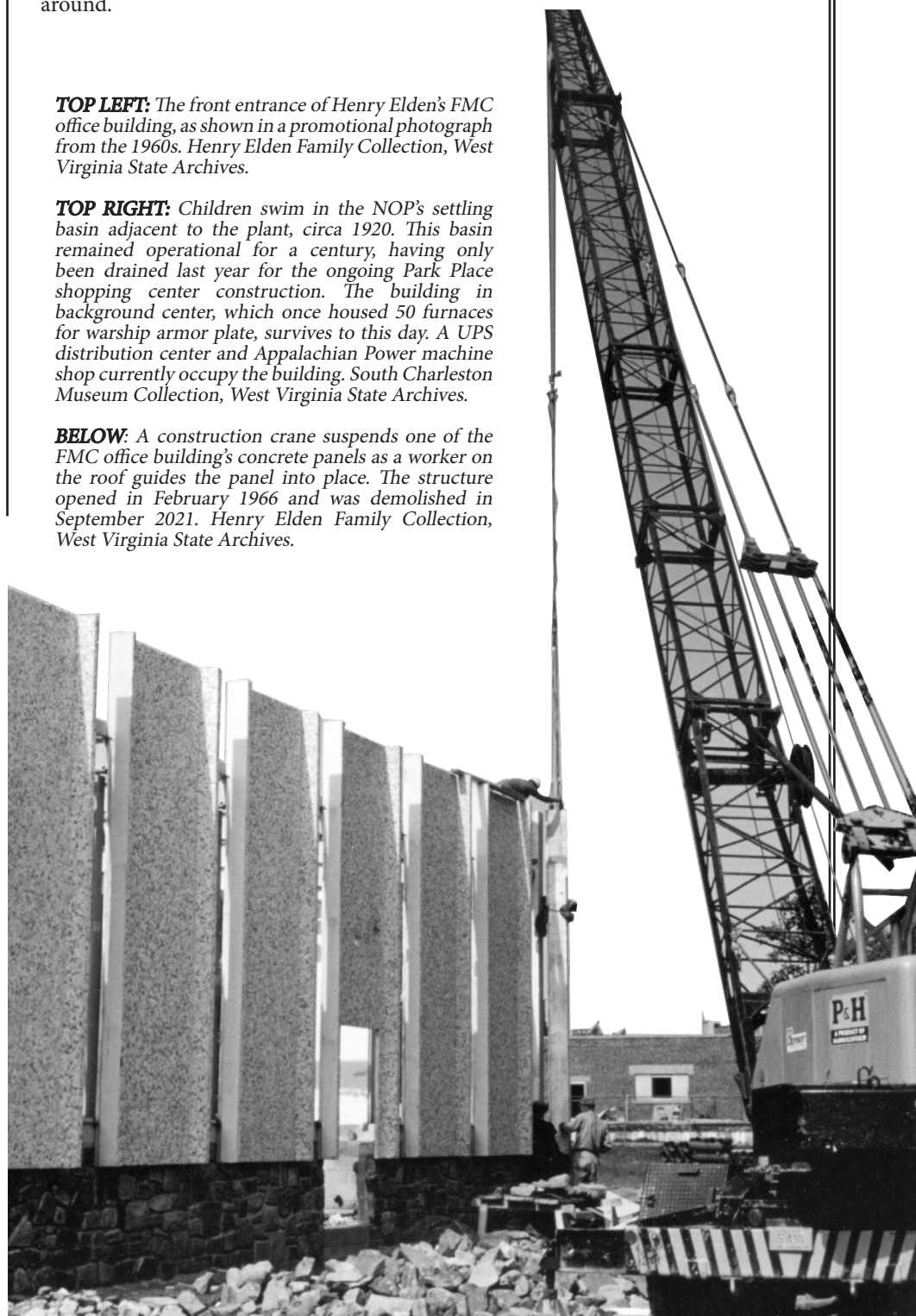
We can't save it all. The ghosts of history must always find their place in the shadow of the living present. But we also live in an age when documentation and dissemination have never been easier. Through vigilance and determination, we can take it upon ourselves to minimize gaps in the historical record—to save what we can for the next generation daring to wonder how we all got to where we are today.

Today was just such an opportunity. As I drove past on MacCorkle Avenue and saw Henry Elden's gray walls tumbling down, I grabbed my camera and swung the car around.

TOP LEFT: The front entrance of Henry Elden's FMC office building, as shown in a promotional photograph from the 1960s. Henry Elden Family Collection, West Virginia State Archives.

TOP RIGHT: Children swim in the NOP's settling basin adjacent to the plant, circa 1920. This basin remained operational for a century, having only been drained last year for the ongoing Park Place shopping center construction. The building in background center, which once housed 50 furnaces for warship armor plate, survives to this day. A UPS distribution center and Appalachian Power machine shop currently occupy the building. South Charleston Museum Collection, West Virginia State Archives.

BELOW: A construction crane suspends one of the FMC office building's concrete panels as a worker on the roof guides the panel into place. The structure opened in February 1966 and was demolished in September 2021. Henry Elden Family Collection, West Virginia State Archives.



**GHOSTS OF MEMORY:
AGNES HOWARD HALL'S
HISTORIC HAUNTING**

by **Eric Waggoner**, Executive Director

Like every theater, hotel, or historic property, every college campus seems to harbor a few ghosts. At the west-facing corner of West Virginia Wesleyan College in Buckhannon stands Agnes Howard Hall—a stately building, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, that currently holds the distinction of being the oldest in-use women's residence hall in the United States. “Aggie,” as the hall is popularly known among the Wesleyan community, is also widely believed to hold another, eerier distinction.

Originally called “Ladies’ Hall,” Agnes Howard Hall was renamed in honor of a student whose family ties to the school ran deep. Agnes’ father Clarence, a lumber businessman, served as a trustee for the college from 1906-1934. Her mother Audree (née Ford), an 1896 graduate of what was then Wesleyan Seminary, lived in Ladies’ Hall just after construction was completed the year prior. Clarence and Audree courted during Audree’s time at the school.

Of the Howards’ five children, four attended Wesleyan. Agnes, the second oldest, entered the college in fall 1916, but health complications (likely rheumatoid arthritis) developed before the end of her first academic year, preventing her return. Agnes Howard passed in December of 1917 in Clarksburg, at the age of 18. As to the cause of death, her death certificate lists only “Complication,” leading some campus historians to speculate she may have developed influenza while in an already weakened state.

Throughout the years, tales of unusual happenings in Agnes Howard Hall, attributed to the ghost of the dorm’s namesake, have been told and retold by multiple generations of Wesleyan students and faculty. As in many good ghost stories, most of these are largely benign: doors opening and closing by themselves, objects disappearing and reappearing in other places, sounds of activity from closed-off or empty rooms filtering through the walls. One often-repeated story tells of a disembodied voice whispering a resident student’s name in her ear, late at night.

Some versions of the legend are easily debunked. Agnes Howard died away from campus, not in the dorm itself, as some particularly imaginative iterations of the story claim. And there is no evidence that she ever lived on the fourth floor of the residence hall, where the activity appears to be concentrated. But when has the truth ever gotten in the way of a good ghost story? Particularly at dusk, when Aggie Hall’s impressive brick outline blends with the skeletal silhouettes of bare trees against Buckhannon’s autumn sky, it’s an easy story to believe. Agnes Howard’s portrait hangs in the residence hall’s lobby and refuses to comment, one way or the other.



TOP: A painted portrait of Agnes Howard.
BOTTOM: The Ladies’ Hall (right) at Wesleyan in 1895, two decades before Agnes Howard’s matriculation.
Courtesy of Brett Miller, West Virginia Wesleyan College Archives

EVENTS OCTOBER - NOVEMBER 2021

Always check with the venue or hosting organization of an event before attending, especially in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, as schedules may change without the knowledge of the Council. For more information, you can also visit the calendar on our website, www.wvhumanities.org.

Oct 1-3 Fort Ashby Days - Part of Mineral County Heritage Weekend. Fort Ashby.	Oct 16 Appalachian Square Dance* - With Rock Garton. Museum of American Glass, Weston. 3pm	Nov 13 An Evening with 1887 Weston's Best and Brightest* - One-act theatrical performance. Masonic Temple, Weston. 5pm
Oct 2 Col. Ruby Bradley- History Alive! Hosted by the DAR Tanner's Cross Roads Chapter. Robey Theater, Spencer. 2pm	Oct 23 Stories of Ed Buck- Living history presentation. Richwood Heritage Center, Richwood. 1pm	Nov 16 Walt Disney - History Alive! Robert F. Kidd Library, Glenville State College. 5pm
Oct 6 Crossroads* - Smithsonian exhibit opening and ribbon cutting. Museum of American Glass, Weston. 6pm	Oct 23 Heritage Fiber Art* - Demo with Julia Bragg. Museum of American Glass, Weston. 3pm	Nov 19 Crossroads - Smithsonian exhibit opening reception. Jack Caffrey Arts and Culture Center, Welch. 6:30pm
Oct 9 Gayle Surface - Living history presentation. Richwood Heritage Center, Richwood. 1pm	Oct 29-30 Weston Guided Historic Tours* - Starting at Museum of American Glass, Weston. 12pm, 2:30pm, 5pm	Nov 18 Theodore Roosevelt - History Alive! Ellenboro Municipal Community Building, Ellenboro. 7pm
Oct 9 Nellie Bly - History Alive! Pendleton County Library, Franklin. 2pm	Oct 30 Civil War Encampment* - Living history demonstration. Holt Park, Weston. 10am-5pm	Nov 20 Folklife Apprenticeship Showcase - Old-time fiddle apprenticeship pair Joe Herrmann and Dakota Karper. The River House, Capon Bridge. 7pm
Oct 9 Reading of Local Literary Works* - Louis Bennett Library, Weston. 6pm	Nov 6-7 Exchange Bank Robbery Reenactment* - Living history demonstration. 133 Center Ave, Weston. 1pm	Nov 27 Gub Spencer, One of Richwood's Lions - Living history presentation. Richwood City Hall Auditorium, Richwood. 1pm
Oct 10 Mental Health History in Lewis County* - Panel discussion. Trans-Allegheny Lunatic Asylum, Weston. 5pm	Nov 6 Open Streets - Black history podcast, presentations, discussions, and performances. 8th Street, Huntington. 3-6pm	
Oct 16 Food Justice in Appalachia - Exhibit opening. On display until June 2022. WVU Downtown Campus Library, Morgantown. 4-6pm	Nov 13 Creation of the Mon Nat'l Forest - Presentation by Rob Whetsell. Richwood Heritage Center, Richwood. 1pm	

*Events marked with an asterisk are part of the Council-sponsored Crossroads Smithsonian tour's second stop in Weston. For more information, contact Anna Cardelli, Weston Historic Landmarks Commission. (303) 594-6607, annamitchell@gmail.com.

The West Virginia Humanities Council, an independent nonpartisan nonprofit, is the state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. The Council is supported by the NEH, the State of West Virginia, and contributions from the private sector. The purposes of the West Virginia Humanities Council are educational, and its mission is to support a vigorous program in the humanities statewide in West Virginia. The Broad Side is ©2021 by the West Virginia Humanities Council. All rights reserved.
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