

# MONTANA HISTORIC PROPERTY RECORD

Montana State Historic Preservation Office  
Montana Historical Society  
PO Box 201202, 1301 E. Lockey  
Helena, MT 59620-1202

Property Address: **17-21 South Last Chance Gulch**  
Historic Address (if applicable): **17-21 South Main**

City/Town: **Helena**

Site Number: **24LC2458**  
(An historic district number may also apply.)

County: **Lewis and Clark**

Historic Name: **St. Louis Block**

Original Owner(s): **Frederick Gamer; A.M. Wollfolk**

Current Ownership  Private  Public

Current Property Name: **Antique Block**

Owner(s): **HGS INVESTMENTS LLC**  
Owner Address: **1601 COOPER ST**  
**MISSOULA, MT 59802-2217**

Phone:

Legal Location

PM: **Montana** Township: **10 N** Range: **3W**

$\frac{1}{4}$  **NW**  $\frac{1}{4}$  **NW**  $\frac{1}{4}$  of Section: **31**

Lot(s): **PARCELS 22 & 23A**  
Block(s):

Addition: **Helena Townsite**  
Year of Addition: **1869**

USGS Quad Name: **Helena** Year: **1992**

Historic Use: **COMMERCIAL / retail; offices**

Current Use: **COMMERCIAL / retail; offices; restaurant**

Construction Date:  Estimated  Actual

Original Location  Moved Date Moved:

UTM Reference [www.nris.mt.gov](http://www.nris.mt.gov)

NAD 27 or  NAD 83(preferred)

Zone: **12** Easting: **420331** Northing: **5159703**

Geocode: **05-1888-31-2-34-15-0000**

National Register of Historic Places

NRHP Listing Date: **6/2/1972**

Historic District: **Helena Historic District**  
NRHP Eligible:  Yes  No

Date of this document: **9/14/2016**

Form Prepared by: **Kate Hampton, MT SHPO**

Address: **1301 E. Lockey, PO Box 201202**  
**Helena, MT 56920-1202**

Daytime Phone: **(406) 444-7742**

MT SHPO USE ONLY

Eligible for NRHP:  yes  no

Criteria:  A  B  C  D

Date: **9/14/2016**

Evaluator: **Kate Hampton**

Comments: Property record form written as part of the "Identifying Montana's African American Heritage Places Project." While already listed as a contributor to the Helena Historic District, the property is individually eligible for its association with Ethnic History.

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merge pages with this form

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### NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

NRHP Listing Date: **6/2/1972**

NRHP Eligibility:  Yes  No  Individually  Contributing to Historic District  Noncontributing to Historic District

NRHP Criteria:  A  B  C  D

Area of Significance: Ethnic History

Period of Significance: 190

## Montana Historic Property Record Form

Property Name: **St. Louis Block**

Smithsonian Number: 24LC2458

Architectural Style: **Other** If Other, specify: **Western Commercial**  
Property Type: **Commercial** Specific Property Type: **Retail; Offices**

Architect: Architectural Firm/City/State:  
Builder/Contractor: Company/City/State:  
Source of Information:

### Architectural Description:

This is a two-story, red brick, commercial building with an asymmetrical design built against a sloping hill. Across the first floor, a series of three storefronts open onto the pedestrian mall. Long, rectangular interior spaces extend toward the rear of the building. Presently, the central and northern spaces are joined to comprise a large restaurant, the southern space is a separate shop.

The original design of the front included very tall storefront windows with wooden, paneled aprons below. A single transom was located above the doors, and the stairway to the upstairs was open to the street. Presently, between these storefronts, the original cast iron columns frame a single, non-original wooden door which encloses the stairway to the upstairs.

By the 1960s, the storefronts at 17 and 19 s. Last Chance had been remodeled, and original fabric was replaced with smaller windows, glass blocks, and projecting metal awnings. Above the storefronts, the facade was covered with plywood panelling. On the upper story, windows above 17 s. Last Chance remained original, others had been replaced.

During the 1970s, the building was rehabilitated. New storefront windows were installed, and the upper story windows were reconstructed to match those original units still extant.

Single or paired, wooden glass doors are recessed in each storefront and appear original. The present storefront windows are framed with aluminum and finished above with a frosted transom band. The storefronts are capped by a cast iron cornice, with squat brackets and decorative caps, planted into the brick end-walls. Carved granite pedestals and capitals trim these brick piers.

Other than alterations described, elements on the front facade appear to be original. Paired and single window openings span the second floor. These openings have a continuous sill and pediments of granite, and separated by brick piers with granite bases, mid-pieces and caps. Windows are double-hung, 1/1 and their transoms are covered.

Above all a bracketed, iron cornice with squat brackets, and a series of floriated and zig-zag ornaments crowns the building. Four large caps trim the cornice, and have carved floral figures.

The rear of the building originally connected to the St. Louis Hotel on Jackson Street. Presently, a parking lot is located at the rear. The hotel is no longer extant; a rear wing which once led to the hotel was extant through 1965, but it was removed and the east wall is now veneered with stone blocks. Glass sliding doors, and a modern wooden door now form the entries. A sunroom with multiple, fixed-pane windows has been added on this facade. wooden stairway along the north wall runs from the parking area to the pedestrian mall.

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### *History of the Property*

The St. Louis Block was built in 1882, in the heart of Helena's original downtown. During the 1880s, as Helena's prosperity peaked, early commercial buildings were cleared away to make room for more substantial, well-designed business blocks such as this one. This block was generally known as the St. Louis Block for it connected with the hotel of the same name at the rear. A.M. Woolfolk who owned the St. Louis Hotel, also owned this building. Woolfolk owned the *Helena Independent* newspaper, which had offices in the upper floor of this building during the 1880s. Soon after it was completed, the building also housed Morris Brothers Crockery and Glassware and, for a short time, the Montana National Bank. Frederick Gamer is credited with ownership of this building in Miller's 1885 History of Montana, and from the abstract it appears that he owned the north end of the building. Frederick Gamer opened a boot and shoe shop on this site in 1867 for J.P. Fink and Co. of Denver. In 1872, Gamer bought the business, and in 1882 was interested in the construction of this block where he remained in business for many years.

### *The Montana Plaindealer*

The *Montana Plaindealer*, one of three African American newspapers in Montana, began publication in Helena in March 1906, under the editorial direction of Joseph B. Bass. Bass moved to Helena in 1906 from Topeka, Kansas, where he worshiped in the African Methodist Episcopal Church and followed the precepts of "self-improvement" promoted by Booker T. Washington. In 1910, Helena had the largest African American population in Montana with 420 individuals out of a population of 12,500.

The four-page, six-column weekly featured a regular column entitled, "Race News," which documented incidents of racial discrimination across the nation. One of the first issues featured a story about a lynching of two African American men taken from a jail in Springfield, Missouri, by a white mob. Each issue contained exhortations by the editor Bass promoting civil rights and highlighting economic opportunities for African Americans in Helena and across Montana. Just below the masthead in the inaugural issue the editor advocated for "the principles of peace, prosperity, and union," while reporting the results of the Republican primaries for the city of Helena and noting the participation of two "colored" delegates from Helena. In 1909 the *Plaindealer* expressed its opposition to an anti-miscegenation bill passed by the Montana legislature that March. In addition to racial violence and political interests, Bass also provided lengthy soliloquies on other topics of national interest, such as the Brownville Incident in 1907, where an entire company of the 25<sup>th</sup> Colored Infantry was dishonorably discharged pending allegations that members of the company were among those who shot up the town of Brownville, Texas, killing a white man. Because there existed no evidence any black soldier was involved, such a generalizing and racist ruling from President Roosevelt was met with national uproar from the black community.

The *Plaindealer* supported its publication through an active printing business, but by 1911 that business faltered and the newspaper closed its doors.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> After Bass closed the *Plaindealer* in 1911, he headed settled in Los Angeles by 1912, where Carlotta Spear hired him as a writer for her fledgling California Eagle. Bass became editor of the Eagle in 1913, married Spear in 1914, shared his wife's activist political interests, and edited the paper until his death in 1934. - See more at: <http://www.blackpast.org/aaw/bass-joseph-blackburn-1863-1934#sthash.2kWL5Pm.dpuf>; Charlotta Bass began her career as a conservative Republican. By the 1940s, however, she moved to the political left. In 1948 she supported Progressive Party candidate Henry Wallace in his failed bid for the Presidency. Four years later she was nominated for Vice President on the Progressive Party ticket. She was the first African American woman to carry a political party's nomination for the second highest office in the land. - See more at: <http://www.blackpast.org/1952-charlotta-bass-acceptance-speech-vice-presidential-candidate-progressive-party#sthash.XMjXQcbf.dpuf>

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### *Subsequent years*

In later years, a saloon, a bowling alley, and the Family Theatre (a vaudeville house) were all housed here. From 1941 until 1954, the building was owned by Ida Levy; from 1954 until 1973, the building was owned by Dorothy Putnam. During that period it was the last house of prostitution to operate in Helena. Presently a restaurant and frame shop/art gallery occupy the building, along with offices upstairs.

### **Information Sources/Bibliography**

Abstract of Title, 1869-1954

*Gold in the Gulch*, Baucus, p. 30

Helena:--City Directories, 1884-1900

*Helena Independent* newspaper, January 1, 1885

*Helena Journal* newspaper, July 14, 1889

Helena Maps

*Historic Architecture: Helena, Montana*, Jacobsen and Shope, p.39

*History of Montana*, Miller, p. 113

*History of Montana*, Leeson, p. 187

Society of Montana Pioneers, author same, p. 156-157

### **Statement of Significance**

The St. Louis Block is listed in the National Register as a contributing building within the Helena Historic District. It conveys a long association with Frederick Gamer, a pioneering Helena businessman. It also housed two of Helena's newspapers. Building owner A.M. Woolfolk ran the *Helena Independent* from this building during the 1880s. It also stands as a well-preserved example of 1880s commercial architecture.

The St. Louis Block gains additional significance for its association with Helena's African American community. Helena resident Joseph B. Bass published the weekly paper the *Montana Plaindealer* from this building in between 1906 and 1911. The newspaper was an important social and political outlet for the black community, providing not only local news and editorials, but also news items from African American communities across the country. For its associations with this prominent Helena African American business, the building is eligible for individual listing in the National Register.

### **Integrity** (location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, association)

The main facade of this building exhibits an excellent retention of integrity, and when viewed from the west, the original design is accurately represented by the building's present appearance. Rehabilitation of the facade during the 1970s uncovered much historic detail, and efforts were made to follow the original design when elements needed to be reconstructed, although the transom band and storefront windows deviate somewhat from the original design. The rear elevation has been remodeled with no sensitivity to the historic design of the structure.

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**Photographs**



West elevation, view to northeast, 2015.



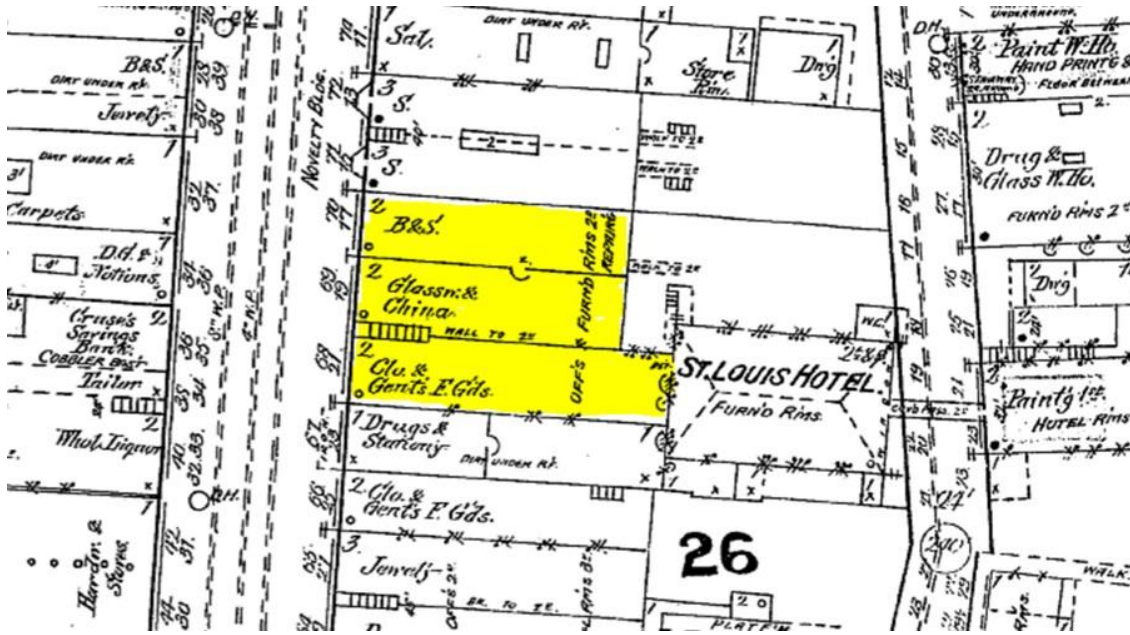
East elevation, view to west-southwest, 2015.

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Historic Maps



Detail of Helena Sanborn Map, 1888, sheet 11.



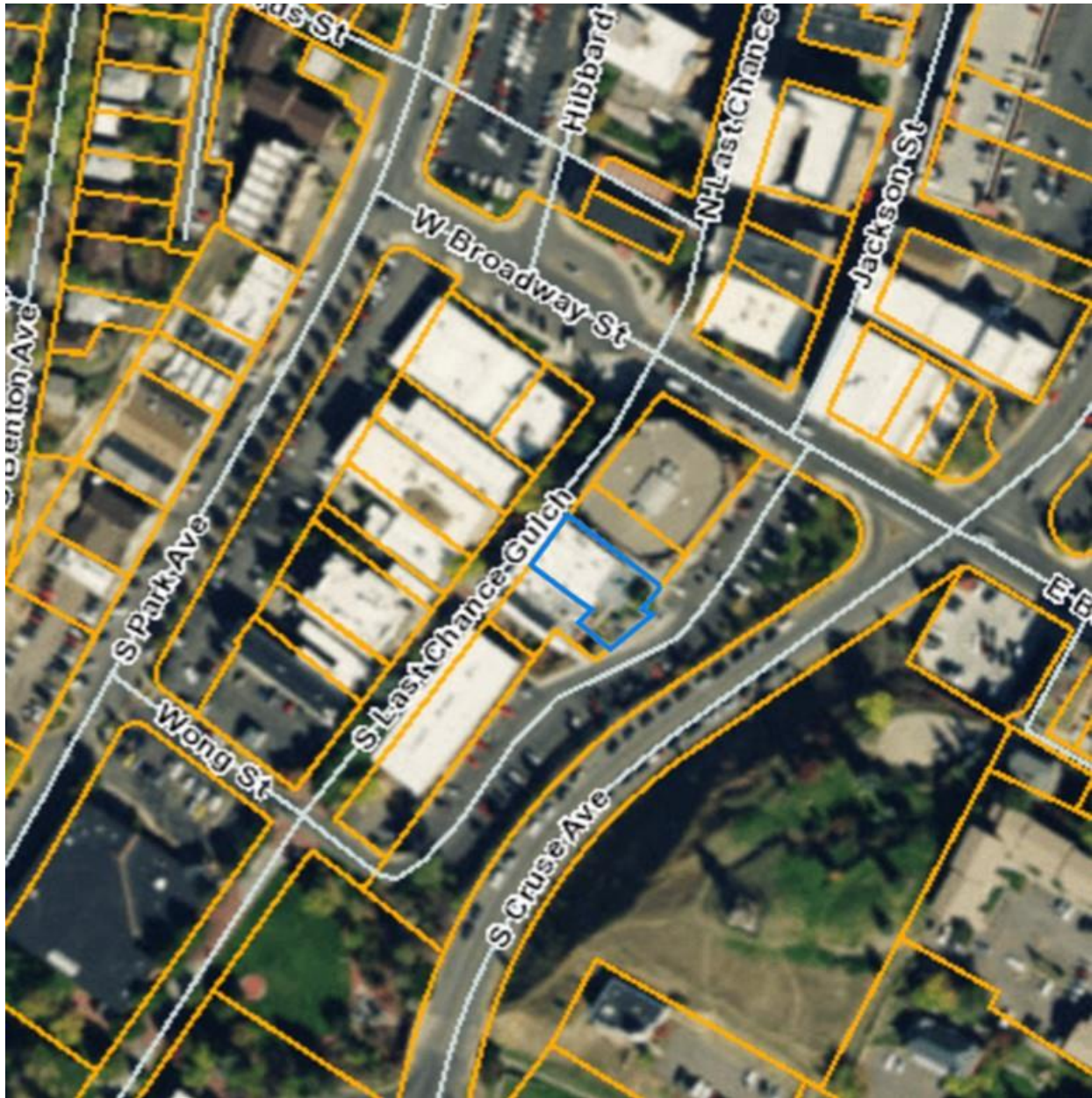
Detail of 1892 Sanborn Map, Sheet 6.

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Site Map/Aerial Photo



St. Louis Block

17-21 S. Last Chance Gulch (formerly S. Main St.), Helena, MT

Geocode: 05-1888-31-2-34-15-0000

Latitude/Longitude (Decimal Degrees): 46.58617 / -112.03994

UTM Zone 12 420331 E / 5159703N

NW ¼ NW ¼ Section 31, T10N, R3W

USGS QUAD 24K Helena



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## Topographic Map



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