

MONTANA HISTORIC PROPERTY RECORD

Montana State Historic Preservation Office
Montana Historical Society
PO Box 201202, 1410 8th Ave
Helena, MT 59620-1202

Property Address: **121 South 26th Street**
Historic Address (if applicable):

City/Town: **Billings**

Site Number: **24YL2046**
(An historic district number may also apply.)

County: **Yellowstone**

Historic Name: **Mrs. Browning's Furnished Rooms**

Original Owner(s): **George Browning**

Current Ownership Private Public

Current Property Name:

Owner(s): **Eleanor Crawford**
Owner Address: **72 Indian Head Road,
Framingham, MA, 01701**

Phone:

Legal Location

PM: **Montana** Township: **01S** Range: **26E**

$\frac{1}{4}$ $\frac{1}{4}$ **NE** $\frac{1}{4}$ of Section: **03**

Lot(s): **23-24**
Block(s): **142**

Addition: **Billings Original Townsite** Year of Addition:

USGS Quad Name: Year:

Historic Use: **Domestic/Boarding**

Current Use: **Domestic**

Construction Date: **1909** Estimated Actual

Original Location Moved Date Moved:

UTM Reference www.nris.mt.gov

NAD 27 or NAD 83(preferred)

Zone: **12** Easting: **694353** Northing: **5072667**

National Register of Historic Places

NRHP Listing Date:

Historic District:
NRHP Eligible: Yes No

Date of this document: **8/17/2015**

Form Prepared by: **Anthony Wood**

Address: **1410 8th Avenue, Helena MT 59620-1202**

Daytime Phone: **406-444-7715**

MT SHPO USE ONLY

Eligible for NRHP: yes no

Criteria: A B C D

Date:

Evaluator:

Comments: Property record form written as part of the
"Identifying Montana's African American Heritage Places
Project."

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merge pages with this form

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NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

NRHP Listing Date:

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

NRHP Criteria: A B C D

Area of Significance: **African American History** Period of Significance: **1909-1944**

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Property Name: Mrs. Browning's Furnished Rooms

Smithsonian Number: 24YL2046

Architectural Style: **Other** If Other, specify:
Property Type: **Domestic** Specific Property Type: **Single Family Residence**

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

Architectural Description:

Setting & Location

Mrs. Browning's Furnished Rooms located at 121 South 26th Street sits on lots 23 and 24, on the southeast corner of block 142 on the far northeastern end of Billings' southside neighborhood. The neighborhood is roughly bounded by 1st Ave S to the northwest, State Ave to the south, and the Phillips 66 refinery complex to the east. The Great Northern Railway line runs along 1st Ave S, and is the major boundary between the southside and downtown Billings, directly to the north. The block is bounded by S 26th St to the southwest, S 25th St to the northeast, 2nd Ave S to the southeast, and 1st Ave S to the northwest.

The majority of the surrounding blocks, with the exception of the adjacent block directly to the southeast of the property, have been developed into commercial buildings, warehouses, and healthcare facilities. The building at 121 S 26th St is the only structure still standing on block 148, which historically had 16 structures in 1923. The lots to the northwest of the house now serve as the parking lot for the Yellowstone Health Partnership, a medical clinic which occupies the entire block on the opposite side of S 26th St. The lots on the northeast side of the block, facing S 25th St, are entirely empty, though they once featured eight homes, including the home of Walker Browning and Captain Horace Bivins (see history of the property). The block opposite 2nd Ave S features several houses dating back to the late 1890s and early 1900s, many with significance to the history of African Americans in Billings.

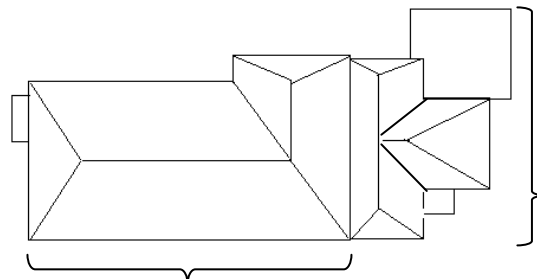


121 S. 26th STREET,
Billings, MT

Situated on the corner of 26th St and 2nd Ave, the building faces the southwest. Within the boundary of the sidewalk, a concrete block retaining wall runs the lengths of the southeast and southwest edge of the property. Atop the wall, a metal wire fence surrounds the extent of the front, sides, and rear lawns. The fence and concrete retaining wall terminates at southwest elevation of the detached, two car garage, which sits at the rear of the property. The front of the house, facing southwest, features a five foot gap in the fence and retaining wall where a flight of concrete steps rise several feet to the level of the front lawn. The gap in the retaining wall features a metal gate at the bottom of the steps. The southeast wall, running along the right side of the house, also features a small metal gate about level with the rear of the house, as it opens to a path leading to the rear entrance. The narrow lawn between the sidewalk and 2nd Ave features four large deciduous trees. The southeastern most end of the property is bounded by the cement driveway leading to the two car garage from 2nd Ave S.

Introduction

The two-story building, built in the Folk National style, which historically operated as Mrs. Browning's Furnished Rooms at 121 S 26th St, sits on a concrete wall foundation, and features cedar wood shingled exterior walls extending to the eaves of a low-pitched hipped roof. The two-story section is generally Ell shaped, with a small wing extending from the rear northwestern elevation. A hipped roof also covers the wing. The rear of the two-story Ell shaped section features a single story kitchen extension. This irregular shaped historic addition features a hipped roof over the main section, a deck roof over a rectangular extension off the northeast corner of the addition, and a deck porch roof over the stoop of the rear entrance on the southeast elevation of the kitchen extension.



Two-story Ell shaped main section

Kitchen extension with addition

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Southwest Façade

The first story of the southwest façade features an open front porch covered by a front-gable roof on the north side of the façade. The porch sits several feet above the level of the front lawn, and has two stone steps rising from the cement path that runs from the sidewalk to the house. The porch roof is supported on either corner by a metal beam. Plywood fills the gable end. Beyond the porch, a metal screen door opens to a wood door with a five-light half circle decorative pane window. The south side of the façade features a large, fixed picture window with a fixed transom light above. The window frames appear to be wood, and painted white. Dark red trim around the window contrasts with the salmon pink color of the wood shingle siding that uniformly covers the exterior. Above the window, a narrow, shingled pent roof extends several inches out from the exterior wall. The second story of the façade contains two evenly-spaced windows. Both windows are one-over-one double-hungs, with white wood frames and dark red trim. The one window of the same style appears at both the first and second stories of the ell-extension's southwest elevation.

Southeast Elevation

The southeast elevation of the building exhibits two separate sections. The main two-story section of the house dominates the western two-thirds of the elevation, and the last third contains the kitchen extension to the east. The first story of the main section contains a three-sided bay window just west of center. An asphalt-shingled hipped roof covers the single-story bay. All three windows featured in the bay are one-over-one double-hung, with white window frames and dark red trim. To the west side of the bay, a single one-over-one double-hung window sits equidistant from the bay to the southwest corner of the elevation. East of the bay window, the main section of the house contains a pair of one-over-one double-hungs. The second story of the main section also features one-over-one double-hung windows. On the far west side of the elevation a single window sits directly above the window of the first story, identical in style and size. Farther east, sitting directly above the hipped roof of the bay, is a pair of windows, and another single window appears above the double window fixture of the first story.

The original kitchen extension seamlessly connects to the main two-story house, and features a pair of one-over-one double-hungs centered in its southeast elevation. These windows are slightly shorter than those featured on the rest of the elevation, but identical in style. To the east of the main kitchen extension, a two-step concrete stoop leads to house's side entrance, which provides ingress to a small hipped addition. A flat roof, supported by a single metal pole at the stoop's east corner, shelters the entry. The entry contains a newer white metal storm, over wooden door similar to the front entrance. The far eastern end of the southeast elevation is the southeast face of the flat-roofed addition off the northeast corner of the house. The southeast elevation of the addition contains no features and is consistent in color and materials to the rest of the building.

Rear Elevation

The northeast (rear) elevation features the kitchen extensions at the first story. A single one-over-one double-hung window appears at the south side of the original kitchen. Unfortunately, vegetation obscures the appearance of the remainder of the first story. The second story level, two single window openings occur to the south. The southernmost window features one-over-one double-hung sashes, and plywood covers the other, set just off-center to the south. The rear elevation of the house also appears to maintain the original cedar shake wood siding that is present throughout the rest of the exterior.

Garage

A large, one-and-one-half story, cinder block, two-bay garage stands at the east corner of the property. Constructed during the 1940s, the building serves as a car garage at the first story and two apartments in the upper story. At the southeast elevation, two evenly-spaced, large, overhead garage doors occupy the first story, and two evenly-spaced, one-by-one vinyl sliders appear within the half-story. The west bay door is metal with four horizontal panels, each of which display a 4-panel pressed design. The east door appears to be a single sheet of wood in a vertical board design. The alley-side northeast elevation contains two evenly-spaced one-by-one sliders across the upper story. Its northwest elevation features two entries to the upper story, each accessed from a wide concrete stoop via a short flight of centered concrete steps. A black wrought-iron rail surrounds the stoop and constitutes the stair railings. Shallow, narrow pent roofs shelter each entry. The southwest elevation contains a pedestrian door at the north side garage level, accessed by a two-step concrete stairwell. Two evenly-spaced vinyl one-over-one double-hungs punctuate the upper story.

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History of the Property

The Browning Family in Billings

In 1865, fifteen year old Walker Browning found himself an orphan, left to care for four younger siblings, including two year old George. Their father, Jack Browning fought and died in the Civil War, serving in a black regiment, and his mother Elizabeth succumbed to illness less than a year later. For seven years Walker worked to support his siblings by taking on odd jobs in his home state of Missouri. In 1872, he moved his family, who were still quite young, to Omaha, where he met and married the young Ruth Merriweather. The next year, Walker continued to move his family west, to Fort Laramie, Wyoming. There, Walker joined a government survey preceding the opening of Yellowstone National Park as a cook. Following the conclusion of the historic survey of America's first National Park, the Browning Family moved to Deadwood, South Dakota where Walker tried his hand at gold mining for several years. In 1879, Walker and Ruth had their first child, Charles, followed in 1880 by a daughter, Claudia. As the mining rush subsided in Deadwood, Walker was once again forced to go west in search of jobs. Leaving his family in South Dakota, Walker followed the Great Northern line to Miles City, where he was employed in a barbershop as a porter. As winter fell, he once again went west, to the city of Billings. He found work around the bustling railroad town after his arrival in December of 1882. He took up residence on the south side of the tracks, which at the time consisted of little more than a tent encampment. By June of 1883, Walker had saved enough money to bring his wife, children, and siblings to live with him in Billings.¹

With his teenage siblings and two young children to protect against Montana's brutal winters, Walker began construction on his family home in 1883. Within a year the home at 106 South 25th street, very near the camp Walker first stayed when he came to Billings, was finished². Until his death in 1925, Walker built his reputation as an honest and hardworking individual, and came to be very well-regarded in the Billings community. Early Billings newspapers reveal Browning as extremely civic-minded, multiple times serving as a juror, and active in the political community³. He was twice appointed as a delegate for the Republican primaries, and city conventions. Others he served with included such community leaders as Peter Yegan, the wealthy rancher and businessman⁴. His professional life was comparably modest to his public stature. Walker was employed most of his life in Billings in the janitorial business, and other odd jobs⁵.

Expectedly, Walker Browning was not only an upstanding citizen of the Billings community, but was considered by many as the central figure of the African American community as well. As a founding member of the Wayman Chapel African Methodist Church and master of the Colored Mason lodge no. 32, Walker worked tirelessly for the betterment of Billing's black citizens⁶. Not only could Walker be considered the center of the black community figuratively, in some ways, he was a geographic center as well. His home at 106 S. 25th Street was likely the first structure in the vicinity. By the time of his death in 1925, the 100 block of S. 25th, and the adjacent blocks, were home to well over fifty African Americans in any given year between 1910 and 1930⁷. 24 of the 70-some buildings were occupied by African Americans, and quite literally, the Browning home stood at the center of this black enclave⁸. Following Walker and Ruth Browning's death, their daughter Claudia and her husband, the famous Calvary Captain of San Juan Hill, Horace Bivins, lived at the home as well⁹.

George and Belle Browning

For nearly 20 years, George Browning lived with his oldest brother, Walker Browning, in Walker's home on the south side of Billings. Not until the age of 45 did George build his own home and business¹⁰. After his marriage to the widow Belle Robinson in 1908, George built a large two-story home on the corner of South 26th Street and 2nd Avenue South. His new home stood only

¹ "Walker Browning Obituary" Billings Gazette, Feb 8th 1925. Accessed at ancestry.com

² Ibid.

³ *The Billings Gazette*, Billings, Montana, 1902-1914. Chronicling America. Accessed online at <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ R.L. Polk & Co, Polk's *Billings (Yellowstone County, Mont.) City Directories. Multiple year search for "Walker Browning."*

⁶ "Walker Browning Obituary" Billings Gazette, Feb 8th 1925. Accessed at ancestry.com

⁷ U.S. Census, 1910, 1930, (*Billings, Yellowstone, Montana*; Roll: T624_837; Page: 3A; Enumeration District: 0251; FHL microfilm: 1374850 [1910]) Accessed online at ancestry.com.

⁸ Sanborn Fire Insurance Co., "Billings, Montana," (New York, New York), sheet 24, 1923.

⁹ U.S. Census, 1930, (*Billings, Yellowstone, Montana*; Roll: 1264; Page: 3A; Enumeration District: 0011; Image: 855.0; FHL microfilm: 2340999 Accessed online at ancestry.com.

¹⁰ R.L. Polk & Co, Polk's 1909 *Billings (Yellowstone County, Mont.) City Directory. 99.*

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hundreds of feet from his brother Walker's house on the same block. Like his brother, George worked in the janitorial field for most of his life¹¹. Sadly, George died fairly young, in 1912 at the age of 50¹². Belle Browning, now twice a widow, opened up her large house to lodgers as a means of income. She operated her furnished rooms from the Browning house at 121 S. 26th Street until her death around 1922.¹³ All of the lodgers listed as living at Mrs. Browning's furnished rooms were African American, including a young man named Harvey Smith.

Harvey and Rose Smith

Around age 22, Harvey Smith rented one of Mrs. Browning's furnished rooms as he worked in Billings as a porter for various businesses. From this time in 1912 until 1922 Harvey remained at 121 South 26th Street as a boarder.¹⁴ However, at the time of Belle's death around 1922, Harvey became the owner and proprietor of Mrs. Browning's furnished rooms. In addition to this new change, in November of 1921, Harvey married a 33 year old African American woman named Rose Updegroove.¹⁵ All data suggests that the Smiths had a very close relationship with Belle Browning, and that it may have been that the young Harvey, who had lived with her for over ten years, was the benefactor of Belle's estate. In fact, the 1922 Billings City Directory even listed Harvey, not as Harvey Smith, but Harvey Browning.¹⁶ Albeit a likely mistake on the part of the Polk directories, it only furthers the possibility that Harvey was the closest thing to a son that Belle Browning had. For over 20 years the Smiths lived at the old Browning house, and in both the 1930 and 1940 censuses, are listed as sharing the home with several boarders, suggesting that they continued to operate Mrs. Browning's furnished rooms.¹⁷ The last year the couple are present in the city directories at that address is in 1944. The two would have been only middle aged at this time, in their mid-fifties, and it is possible they remained at 121 South 26th Street for several more years. However, records seem to indicate that Harvey passed away in 1946, at the age of 57.¹⁸

¹¹ R.L. Polk & Co, Polk's *Billings (Yellowstone County, Mont.) City Directories. Multiple year search for "George Browning."*

¹² R.L. Polk & Co, Polk's *Billings (Yellowstone County, Mont.) City Directories. 1912-1914 search for "George Browning."*

¹³ R.L. Polk & Co, Polk's 1922 *Billings (Yellowstone County, Mont.) City Directory. 40.*

¹⁴ R.L. Polk & Co, Polk's *Billings (Yellowstone County, Mont.) City Directories. 1912-1922 search for "Harvey Smith (Browning)."*

¹⁵ "Marriage Certificate for Harvey Smith and Rose Updegroove," Nov, 1921. Accessed online at ancestry.com.

¹⁶ R.L. Polk & Co, Polk's 1922 *Billings (Yellowstone County, Mont.) City Directory. 40.*

¹⁷ U.S. Census, 1930, 1940, (*Billings, Yellowstone, Montana*; Roll: 1264; Page: 3A; Enumeration District: 0011; Image: 855.0; FHL microfilm: 2340999) Accessed online at ancestry.com.

¹⁸ "Harvey Smith," State Death Index, Accessed online at ancestry.com.

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Information Sources/Bibliography

Ancestry.com. Searches for Walker Browning, George Browning, Belle Browning, and Harvey Smith. Results included: Walker Browning Obituary" Billings Gazette, Feb 8th 1925; Marriage Certificate for George Browning and Belle Robinson, 1-7-1908; Marriage Certificate for Harvey Smith and Rose Updegrove, 11-1921; Harvey Smith State Death Index; U.S. Census, 1910, 1920, 1930 and 1940.

R.L. Polk & Co. *Polk's Billings (Yellowstone County, Mont.) City Directory*, Salt Lake City, UT: R.L. Polk & Co., 1901, 1903, 1905, 1909, 1912, 1919, 1921, 1922, 1925, and 1944.

Sanborn Fire Insurance Company. "Billings, Montana." New York, New York. Sheet 24. 1923.

"Walker Browning, Billings Pioneer, Summoned by Death." *Billings Gazette*. February 8, 1925.

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Statement of Significance

Mrs. Browning's Furnished Rooms, located at 121 South 26th Street, is greatly significant to the history of African Americans in Billings, as well as to the general history of Billings as a whole. The structure gains significance from its association with the Browning family and Walker Browning who was not only the leading member of the black community for over forty years, but also a "pioneer" and "landmark" citizen of Billings. Furthermore, the home of Walker's youngest brother George and his wife Belle, became an established boarding house for African Americans living in Billings' southside enclave. Even after the deaths of the Browning family, the house at 121 South 26th Street continued to function as Mrs. Browning's Furnished Rooms into the mid-1940s. Also, until around 1946, and the death of Harvey Smith, who became the proprietor of the business after Belle Browning passed in 1922, the building was always owned by members of Billings' African American community, making it possibly the longest operating black business in the city.

In addition to the historical narrative, the current rarity of the once abundant buildings associated with African Americans in Billings surely adds to the significance of the property. The majority of the surrounding blocks, with the exception of the adjacent block directly to the southeast of the property, have been developed into commercial buildings, warehouses, and healthcare facilities. The building at 121 S 26th St is the only structure standing on block 148, which historically had 16 structures in 1923, including the home of Walker Browning which he built in 1883. In any given year between 1910 and 1930, well over fifty African Americans lived on the adjacent blocks to Mrs. Browning's Furnished Rooms. Today, the two-story building standing alone on a block of empty lots and parking lots remains as one of the last pieces of the African American community in Billings.

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

The building that historically housed Mrs. Browning's Furnished Rooms exhibits extremely high integrity. Though the historical setting and feeling of the building have been greatly diminished by surrounding development projects, the house itself retains very good integrity in regards to the location, design, materials, workmanship, and association. The house currently exhibits most, if not all of the original materials, notably the cedar shake wood siding. The rear kitchen extension and subsequent addition off the kitchen both appear to have been added well within the period of significance. Both the front and rear entrance doors do not appear to be original, but are still compatible with the overall style of the house. Together with its excellent architectural integrity and profound historical significance, the building at 121 South 26th Street is individually eligible under Criterion A.

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Photographs



Mrs. Browning's Furnished Rooms
Southwest Façade, facing northeast
8/13/15, (Google Earth Photo)

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Mrs. Browning's Furnished Rooms
Southeast elevation, facing northwest
8/13/15, (Google Earth Photo)

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Site Map/Aerial Photo



Mrs. Browning's Furnished Rooms
121 S 26th St,
Billings, Mt
T01 S R26 E S03
Google Earth Satellite Image 2015

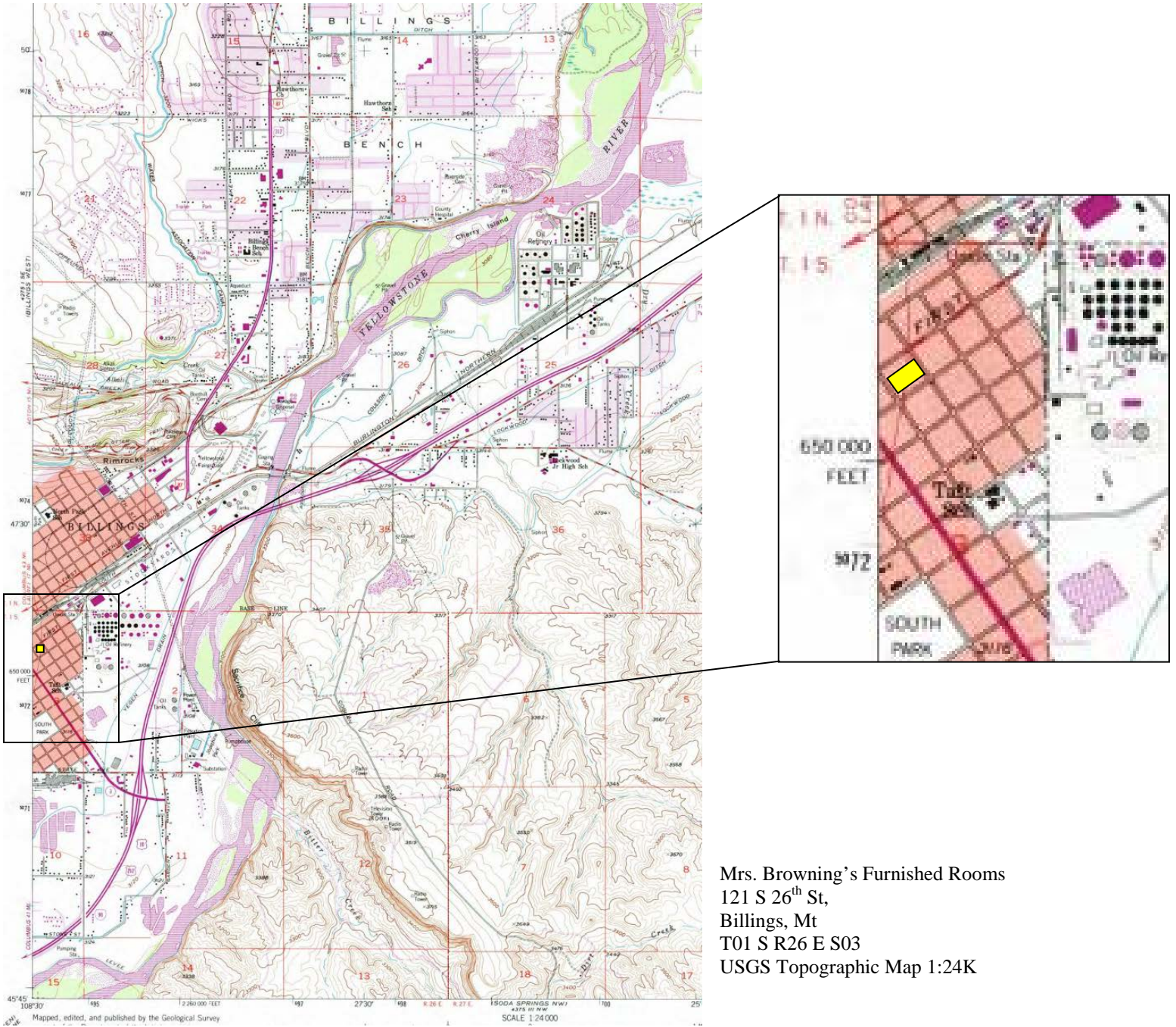


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Topographic Map



Mrs. Browning's Furnished Rooms
121 S 26th St,
Billings, Mt
T01 S R26 E S03
USGS Topographic Map 1:24K