

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
EVALUATION/RETURN SHEET

Substantive Review

Main Street Historic District No. 1 (Hartford
Downtown MRA)
Hartford County
CONNECTICUT

DOE/OWNER OBJECTION

Working No. NOV 15 1984

Fed. Reg. Date:

Date Due: 12/23/84 - 12/30/84

Action: ☒ ACCEPT 12/23/84

☐ RETURN

☐ REJECT

Federal Agency: _____

- ☐ resubmission
☐ nomination by person or local government
☐ owner objection
☐ appeal

Determined Eligible

Substantive Review: ☒ sample ☐ request ☐ appeal ☐ NR decision

Reviewer's comments:

Recom./Criteria ACCEPT - CRITERIA A+C

Reviewer Mike Dwyer

Discipline ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY

Date 12/23/84

_____ see continuation sheet

Nomination returned for: _____ technical corrections cited below
_____ substantive reasons discussed below

1. Name

2. Location

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use
	Public Acquisition	Accessible	

4. Owner of Property

5. Location of Legal Description

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

Has this property been determined eligible? ☐ yes ☐ no

7. Description

Condition

- ☐ excellent
☐ good
☐ fair

- ☐ deteriorated
☐ ruins
☐ unexposed

Check one

- ☐ unaltered
☐ altered

Check one

- ☐ original site
☐ moved date _____

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

- ☐ summary paragraph
☐ completeness
☐ clarity
☐ alterations/integrity
☐ dates
☐ boundary selection

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Main Street Historic District #1

District E

Description

The section of Main Street that is the north-south spine of Main Street Historic District #1 is a wide roadway three blocks long with ample sidewalks. The street is on the crest of a low ridge that falls off to the east toward the Connecticut River and to the west toward the railroad. An important feature of the street that contributed to its development and success was the trolley line that for decades ran down its center, bringing shoppers from all over the city to this center of retailing. Here were concentrated the principal department and variety stores of the region during the final quarter of the 19th century and first half of the 20th century. Two of these stores are left, G. Fox & Co. and Sage, Allen & Co.; in both cases the buildings are now used in part for purposes other than retailing.

The principal department stores in the district were G. Fox & Co., Brown, Thomson & Co., and Sage, Allen & Co., and the principal variety stores were S. S. Kresge and J. J. Newberry. There was one additional large store, Wise, Smith & Co., located on the west side of the street north of Pratt Street. As its building has been insensitively altered, it is not included in the district. One building not associated with the shopping function, St. Paul's Church, is included in the district because it is located directly behind the two largest stores, is the last remaining building from Hartford's former East Side and played an unusually important role in Hartford's ethnic history.

The buildings in the district range in height from four to eleven stories. All are built of brick, several with stone trim or facing, and one, 869 Main Street, with a partial wooden front. The buildings date from 1855 to 1929. More of the buildings are in the Neo-Classical Revival style than any other as the early 20th century, when that style was foremost, was the most active building period, but the earlier Gothic Revival and Romanesque Revival styles are represented as well as the later Art Moderne.

There are 13 principal buildings in the district, all but two of which are considered to contribute to its historical and architectural significance. There are approximately seven acres in the district.

Boundary Justification

Main Street Historic District #1 encompasses the part of Main Street that historically was lined with retailers, from Asylum to Pratt Street on the west side and Kinsley to Talcott streets on the east. The elevated highway of Interstate 84 runs just north of the district; an urban development project, Constitution plaza, to its east; a square block of new construction, now in progress, abuts the district to the south; and on the west the district is bordered by the Pratt Street and Asylum-Trumbull-Pearl Streets districts.

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Photograph #11

- C Hartford-Aetna Building
18 Asylum Street
a/k/a 829 Main Street

When the 11-story, steel-frame, brick-and-limestone Hartford-Aetna Building was constructed in 1912, it was the tallest building in the city. In the first two stories, Donn Barber, the New York architect, used an arcade of 2-story arched openings, as he would a few years later at the Hartford Times Building. Some of the arcade at the second floor still is visible on the Asylum Street elevation, although it is covered by a modern store front on the Main Street elevation.

In the third floor, over a stone cornice with Greek key, bands of buff brick alternate with limestone. Above the third floor six stories of brick, unembellished except for pilasters at the building's corners, carry the structure up to another molded stone cornice. At the top of the structure, completing the tripartite, classical-column organization of the design, are two stories with pilasters between the windows supporting a full entablature crowned with parapet and balustrade.

The building turns the corner, of less than 90 degrees, from Main to Asylum streets with a graceful, rounded surface. There are three arched openings in the 57-foot Main Street elevation. The entrance was in the central opening. There are six arched openings on the 100-foot Asylum Street elevation, two covered over, four partially visible. A fine second-floor cornice runs above the arches, with dentil course and egg-and-dart molding. The light color of the stone of this 2-story base was a striking visual feature when the building was new.

On the interior, the first two floors were a single space for a large, open banking floor of the Hartford National Bank. Its richly decorated ceiling was a notable feature of the banking room. The ceiling was executed by J. Wallace Finn of New York City according to the plan of Donn Barber. Divided into two floors in 1929, the upper level has been unused since the time of the alterations.

The Hartford-Aetna Building is a fine example of early sky-scraper architecture that combines the Neo-Classical Revival style with steel-frame construction. The proportions and detailing were skillfully handled by Barber in a solid contribution to the district's early-20th-century development.

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The Hartford-Aetna Building replaced the Catlin Building, a 7-story building of similar design but probably not steel frame with the same rounded corner constructed in 1890 to the plans of William C. Brocklesby. Cost of the new building was \$500,000. Wells Brothers of New York City was the contractor.

C Corning Building
805-811 Main Street
a/k/a 11-21 Asylum Street

Photograph #9

The 6-story Corning Building, erected in 1929, has three bays extending 51 feet on Main Street and ten bays extending 148 feet on Asylum. Its first two stories are clad in granite and the upper floors in red and black brick. The first-floor store fronts have been altered. The second floor has large display windows in accordance with the then prevailing practice of renting the first and second floors for retail shops. In this building the second-floor window in each bay has a large central section of a single piece of plate glass flanked by narrower pieces of glass of the same height. The tripartite whole has a transom of eight large lights, four over the central section and two over each of the flanking sections. The upper floors have two 3-over-3 steel sash in each bay.

The bays are divided by pilasters and the windows within each bay are divided by smaller pilasters, with stone discs in the spandrels. At the top there is a stone string course with a parapet above it. The upward thrust of the pilasters is continued by having them rise above the parapet. The pilasters are capped by stone.

The entrance to the upper floors is in the center of the Asylum Street elevation, under incised lettering giving the name of the building. Below the lettering there is an intricate metal grille with two lanterns. The grille uses traditional motifs such as trefoil and anthemion with sinuous curves suggestive of the Art Nouveau.

The 3-bay Main Street elevation of the Corning Building is similar to the Asylum Street elevation except that the central bay is elongated in width. At the second floor the central piece of glass in the tripartite window is wider and in the upper floors there are three windows in the bays instead of two. There is a bronze plaque at sidewalk level at the south end of the Main Street elevation. The plaque, dated 1891, states that Horace Wells discovered anesthesia while performing dental surgery "upon this spot in 1844, using nitrous oxide.

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Architects for the building were the Hartford firm of Whiton & McMahon who are primarily known in the city for their schools. They drew plans for the Richard J. Kinsella School on Charter Oak Avenue and for a large addition to the Washington Street School at the corner of New Britain Avenue. Cost of the Corning Building was \$385,000.

C Newberry Building
845 Main Street

Photograph 12

Like the Corning Building, 845 Main Street was constructed in the last boom days of the 1920s, just before the onslaught of the Great Depression. Its 1929 design is organized along classical lines in a relatively flat wall plane that is indicative of the increasing influence of modern architecture. The first-floor store front has been altered and the second floor is covered by an added plain surface. The third and fourth floors of stone are divided into three sections by pilasters with recessed panels. The central section has three pairs of 1-over-1 windows separated by stone mullions while the end sections have tripartite windows, creating two horizontal bands of windows. Horizontal recessed panels below the windows and below the cornice reinforce the effect.

A low wall embellished with medallions rises above the cornice. It supports a central, low, stepped parapet on which urns are placed above the pilasters.

The Newberry store has occupied the premises since 1931.

C Kresge Building
859 Main Street

Photograph 13

This 1928 buff brick building is a companion piece to its neighbor to the south, 845 Main Street, in age, materials, style and tenant. Its second floor also has been covered over with a flat surface. Paired pilasters at the ends of the elevation rise through the third and fourth floors. The space between them is divided into three equal bays by two single pilasters. Each bay at third and fourth floors has identical tripartite windows, the central section being a large, single pane of glass and the flanking sections 1-over-1. There are medallions in the spandrels separating the floors. At the roof line, the plain stone frieze has a disc over each pilaster under a stepped parapet with central cartouche.

S. S. Kresge Co. of Detroit was the tenant in the building from the first, initially with a conventional "five and ten," later with a disco store. The architect was Harold Holmes of Detroit. Another tenant now occupies the space.

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- C Archer Kent Building
869 Main Street

Photograph 14

869 Main Street, c. 1890, is the oldest Main Street building in the district. Four stories high, again its first two floors have been altered with a modern front. The third and fourth floors, however, continue to have their 3-sided glazed wooden bays, with large, 1-over-1 windows flanked by smaller 1-over-1 windows. Narrow, paneled mullions frame the glazing. In the spandrels between the floors are diamond-shaped panels separating the large windows and square panels separating the smaller, flanking windows. A dentil course runs above the fourth-floor windows, under the frieze. Above the frieze, the flat roof projects markedly. On the leading edge of the roof projection, raised borders form a panel that is filled with a cluster of horizontal torus moldings.

- C Casual Corner Building
875 Main Street

Photograph 14

875 Main Street, on the southwest corner of Pratt Street, is a 5-story, granite-clad building of two 3-bay sections built in a planar version of the Neo-Classical Revival style. The southern section was built in 1920 and the section on the corner of Pratt Street in 1921.

The first floor has been covered with variegated brick facing. The second floor has tripartite windows of large single panes with transoms, creating a large amount of glazed surface. This window scheme is a 20th-century design feature rather than a classical detail. The windows are separated by paneled granite mullions. The two sections of the building are separated by a single vertical course of rusticated stone, with similar courses at the building's corners. There is a molded cornice over the second-floor windows of the corner half of the building.

Windows at the third, fourth and fifth floors are conventional 8-over-8, double-hung sash. The windows have slightly-projecting sills and narrow, recessed frames but are essentially unadorned, thereby contributing to the flatness of the elevation at these three stories. Exceptions to the planar quality are the cartouches between the third-floor windows.

At the roof line a flat molded cornice over modillion course supports a stone balustrade in the classical manner.

The Pratt Street elevation of nine bays is similar to the Main Street elevation of the corner building, without the third-floor cartouches. The second-floor windows have bowed iron railings, as do those in the Main Street elevation.

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Architects for 875 Main street were Buchman & Kahn. Albert Buchman (1859-1936) in 1917, at the age of 58, entered into partnership with the younger and more well-known Ely Jacques Kahn (1884-1972) and thereby began the most productive phase of his career. He participated actively in the ensuing large and productive practice, one of the firm's better known commissions being the Student Building at Barnard College. Kahn graduated from the Columbia School of Architecture and the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, designed many buildings in a restrained, classical style such as 875 Main Street, married a member of the New York Times Sulzberger family, and was prominent in professional and artistic circles. In a later partnership, Kahn & Jacobs, his firm designed 1 Constitution Plaza (1963) in Hartford, a high rise component of the urban redevelopment project.

C Sage, Allen & Co.
884, 890, 896-902 Main Street

Photograph 15

Sage, Allen's department store runs from 884 Main Street, at the north-east corner of Kinsley Street, to 902 Main Street. 884 and 890 Main Street, the first two structures behind the store's present, modern front are 2- and 3-story early-20th-century and 19th-century buildings that now are part of the single store complex. The principal component in the complex is the 8-story, brick structure built facing Pratt Street by Sage, Allen & Co. in 1898 to house their growing mercantile business.

The building is Neo-Classical Revival, with festoons, roundels and panels of raised ornament. In the upper portion now visible, the tripartite windows of large, single panes are arranged vertically under three stilted half-round arches. The windows are divided vertically by attached colonnettes and horizontally by panels of raised foliage. The arches spring from the capitals of four pilasters that frame the windows. There are cartouches below the capitals of the two central pilasters. Bosses above these pilasters support molded drip stones with key consoles that outline the arches. The terra-cotta drip stones have egg-and-dart moldings.

In the top two floors, six single windows are arranged similarly under smaller arches. This device of doubling the number of arches and reducing the size of the apertures was often used in the Romanesque Revival, as in the Cheney Block north of Sage, Allen, and in this sense the two buildings relate to one another.

The elaborate roof line of the building consists of six terra-cotta swags, a broad frieze with brackets and a molded cornice with modillion blocks that supports a range of antifixes.

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Originally, both the street level and second floor had shop windows. The third floor was the bottom level in the series of four terminating in the arches, of which three are now visible.

The building has been extended to the rear.

The architect for the Sage, Allen & Co. building was Isaac A. Allen, Jr.¹ (1859-1953) who had a long and prolific practice in Hartford. In Historic Downtown Hartford, he designed the Dillon Building (listed in the National Register of Historic Places) and other structures on Pratt Street, and Shoor Brothers store on Trumbull Street, which resembles Sage, Allen.

1. The present Normand F. Allen states that his forebear, the Normand F. Allen who was an original partner in the store, was of no known relationship to Isaac A. Allen, Jr., but as they were both born in Enfield, Connecticut, it is likely that they were distantly related.

NC 906 Main Street

Photograph 10

906 Main Street is a 1-story building with no architectural character.

C Cheney Block
920-944 Main Street

Photographs 10, 16

The Cheney Block was built of quarry-faced brownstone ashlar in 1875-1876 to the design of H. H. Richardson. Listed in the National Register of Historic Places October 6, 1970, it is perhaps the building of most architectural interest in Historic Downtown Hartford. From late 19th century to mid-20th century, the building was occupied by the Brown, Thomson & Co. department store, until it closed in the 1960s.

C G. Fox & Co.
956 Main Street

Photographs 16-19

G. Fox and Co. built their 11-story, brick store in 1917-1918 in a Neo-Classical Revival style. Major alterations at street level in 1934-1935 introduced a modern Art Deco effect in the marquise. With additions and adjoining warehouses and high-rise parking garage, the Fox

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complex for decades was the major influence in Main Street Historic District #1.

After a disastrous fire in 1917, G. Fox & Co., already a well-established department store, built the replacement structure that exists today. There are eight bays at the street level; the second from each end is an entrance, while each of the other six is a large, plate glass, store window. A broad marquise is suspended across the front of the building at first-floor level, covering most of the sidewalk. Its edge is faced with three bright, stainless steel bands and its corners are rounded, after the fashion of Art Deco or "streamlined" practice. The bands are repeated in smaller scale over the entrances, and the surrounds of the entrances are glass blocks in accordance with the usage of the times. At the second floor, eight large windows are covered over, below a molded, stone cornice. The first floor interior in the Art Deco mode.

The next six floors correspond to the shaft of a classical column, above the 2-story base. These six stories are quite plain, in the cream-colored brick, with eight pairs of windows whose sills extend to become string courses. In the next two stories, the ninth and tenth, there is a central, attached, 2-story, Corinthian marble column in each bay, dividing the two windows, and each bay is flanked by 2-story Corinthian marble pilasters. At the corners of the building the pilasters are paired. Above this level is a large, molded, stone cornice that incorporates a dentil course and a range of lion heads and is surmounted by an attic with eight tripartite windows and a smaller, final cornice.

A 1937, copper-clad, 2-story walkway leads from the north elevation of the store across Talcott Street to the old Fox warehouse. The 3-centered arch of the elevated structure has a paneled soffit. The first level of the walkway's elevation is a horizontal range of panels, each with a central medallion over cartouche, above which are two stories of 12-over-12 windows arranged in five bays. The central bay is flanked by two Ionic, paneled pilasters, the next two windows are separated by a single pilaster, and there are pairs of pilasters at the ends. In the upper floor, the central window is replaced by an octagonal clock. A molded cornice is surmounted by a parapet that is stepped over the paired pilasters.

The warehouse buildings on the north side of Talcott Street to which the walkway connects are not included in the district, nor is the Fox high-rise parking garage on the east side of Market Street. However, additions east of the main building fronting on Market Street, that work as a unit with the main building, are included even though they are later and have little architectural interest.

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The architect for the new building in 1917 was Cass Gilbert (1858-1934), the St. Paul draughtsman who served as an apprentice to Stanford White before starting his own highly successful career of designing buildings in the Neo-Classical Revival style, to which the 66-story Woolworth Building for which he is perhaps most famous is a Gothic Revival exception. The 1934-1935 alterations at the ground floor, that obliterated much of Case Gilbert's work, were designed by Taussig-Flesch & Associates of Chicago. Originally, there were marquises suspended over the entrances only. Each shop window had a tripartite transom, now covered over, while at the second floor there were three 1-over-1 windows in each bay in the tradition of second-floor show windows.

The Fox store not only dominated the retail scene in Hartford for generations, but also was a respected institution known for the quality, style and broad selection of its merchandise and for efficiency and fairness of its dealings with customers. Founded by Gerson Fox, the business was substantially expanded by his son, Moses, and brought to the height of its community position and prestige by his granddaughter, Beatrice Fox Auerbach. In an age of branch stores, Mrs. Auerbach refused to establish branches and instead fought successfully for layout of Interstate highways, that bound Historic Downtown Hartford, to make it easy for outlying customers to reach the huge, downtown store.¹ The Fox imprint on the layout and organization of Main Street Historic District #1 is basic and impressive.

C St. Paul's Church
125 Market Street

Photograph 20

St. Paul's Church, built in 1855, is a simple, brownstone, gable-roofed, 47 x 89-foot, Gothic Revival edifice. Its front elevation is divided into three sections by four buttresses. The central section has paired 6-over-6 windows in the basement, paired windows in a single pointed-arch opening above the water table, two lancet windows high up in the first floor and a round, louvered opening in the gable end. The flanking sections have doors under lancet windows. On the north elevation two of the pointed-arch windows have been replaced with rectangular apertures and a fire escape. Similar alterations have been made in the south elevation.

While the church's architectural quality is limited, its history of service to a series of immigrant groups places it in the forefront of importance in Hartford's ethnic history. The church served the Front Street community, known as the East Side, where waves of immigrants coming to Hartford first took up residence. The East Side was demolished in post-World War II redevelopment for Constitution Plaza.

1. After Mrs. Auerbach's death and sale of the company branches were established.

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The building was constructed in 1855 to serve the immigrant community as a mission, called the Free Episcopal Chapel, by Christ Episcopal Church on Main Street. It became an Anglican parish in its own right, with the name St. Paul's Church, in 1857. By 1880 the number of German immigrants had increased to the point where the Lutheran Church of the Reformation was formed, and it bought St. Paul's. German-language Sunday services and a Saturday German school were conducted in the building until 1897. By the end of the century, the number of Italian immigrants was in the ascendancy, and in 1898 the church was rededicated again, this time as St. Anthony's Roman Catholic Church. St. Anthony's merged with St. Patrick's on Church Street in 1958.

A further artifact of historical importance happens to be located at the northeast corner of the church. It is the grave of Dr. Normand Morison, 18th-century physician who lived on Main Street and whose property presumably ran back to this point. His grandson, of the same name, in his will drawn August 21, 1779, provided as a condition to clear title to the land that future owners of the property "shall always keep and maintain a good fence around that place where my Grand Father Doctor Normand Morison" is buried. The condition has been observed for more than 200 years, thereby providing a rare tangible, physical link that ties together the 18th and 20th centuries in Historic Downtown Hartford.

NC Second Structure

South of the Church and connected to it there is a second structure that is a 1-story commercial building serving as a book store, without architectural quality.

Significance

Criteria C (Architecture) and A (History)

The buildings in Main Street Historic District #1 are good examples of early-20th-century Neo-Classical Revival commercial architecture, with some earlier and later structures. (Criterion A - Architecture) As they were the heart of the city's shopping area they drew large crowds and were an important influence in the lives of people in the city. St. Paul's Church is a remnant of Hartford's ethnically important former East Side while its adjoining grave is a reminder of the original residential character of Main Street. (Criterion A - History)

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Criterion C - Architecture

The buildings in the district were constructed during the years from 1855 through the 1920s. The oldest structure is St. Paul's Church, a Gothic Revival brownstone edifice typical of its era and probably more significant for its ethnic associations than for its architecture. The Cheney Block of 1875 is next in sequence of age. It is one of H.H. Richardson's outstanding Romanesque Revival buildings, with the added interest that Stanford White was supervising architect for construction. The Cheney Block has the strength and simplicity of design, the polychromed quarry-faced stone building materials, the mass, and the upper stories with arches graduated in size that characterize Richardson's best work. At the time it was built it was surrounded by other buildings, for Main Street already was fully developed, but of all the buildings standing on Main Street in 1875, only the Cheney Block is left.

Isaac A. Allen, Jr., a local architect, demonstrated his up-to-date interpretation of the Neo-Classical Revival style in his store for Sage, Allen & Co. of 1898. His design for the front elevation starts with two stories of shop windows at the base, then four stories of windows grouped under three arches and six 2-story arches at the top. Elegantly embellished, the whole was well done in the fashion of the day. Donn Barber for the tallest building in the city in 1912, 11 stories, used 2-story arches at the base, seven stories of regularly spaced windows and 2-story pilasters at the top in a design that was made up of elements analagous to the base, shaft and capital of a classic column. Cass Gilbert continued the classical reference in his 1917 building for G. Fox & Co., whose alterations from the 1930s are in themselves a significant example of the Art Deco mode.

The Newberry and Kresge buildings on the west side of the street, the last to be built in the district, reflect the strengthening of interest in Art Deco architecture that occurred in the decade of the 1920s, showing continued use of the classic idiom but in almost flat rather than three-dimensional designs.

The continued presence of these buildings demonstrates the progression in acceptable solutions to the provision of commercial space on Main Street. The utility of the first several floors for retail purposes, with offices above in some cases, was a functional success at the time, working well for the stores and for the people they served. The overall quality of the designs provided by leading national architects and competent local men is of a high level.

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Criteria A - Social History

The importance of the district as the principal shopping center for Greater Hartford in the last quarter of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century cannot be overemphasized. Convenient streetcar transportation brought people from afar. Downtown was unchallenged. The importance of the district as the location of principal department and variety stores ensured heavy traffic, when activity in the district was at its height.

While coming downtown to visit the stores often was an end in itself, the shopping experience was also part of a larger experience that involved movie theaters, restaurants, lodges, banking and other activities. A wide-ranging group of possible business, social and shopping options made downtown important to people for a wide variety of reasons. Main Street Historic District #1 was significant for its contribution to this mix, the contribution of big stores selling merchandise of all types and providing a strong attraction for people to come downtown.

The earlier history of the district is marked by artifacts on Market Street. The church faithfully served succeeding waves of immigrants and the nearby grave enforces recognition of the change that has occurred over the centuries in the district from low density Colonial settlement to high density commercial activity.

Geographical Data

Acreage: Approximately 7.5 acres.
Quadrangle: Hartford North

1:24000

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UTM References:

A 18/693570/4626470
B 18/693550/4626460
C 18/693520/4626450
D 18/693520/4626430
E 18/693540/4626420
F 18/693540/4626380
G 18/693500/4626390
H 18/693500/4626310
I 18/693300/4626320
J 18/693370/4626220
K 18/693340/4626230
L 18/693360/4626290
M 18/693340/4626300
N 18/693350/4626360
O 18/693380/4626350
P 18/693380/4626480
Q 18/693460/4626480
R 18/693460/4626500

Verbal Boundary Description: The district's boundary is shown by the dotted line on the map drawn at scale of 1" = 110'

Historic Downtown Hartford Multiple Resource Area

Main Street Historic District #1

Scale: 1" = 110'

