

Ogden Keeler Industrial Buildings

Western Felt Works and Turner Manufacturing Company



Ogden-Keeler Industrial Buildings, Turner Manufacturing Company Building, 4147-4151 W. Ogden, Alfred S. Alschuler, 1918 – 1921. Photo credit: Serhii Chrucky / Esto

OVERVIEW

The Ogden Keeler Industrial Buildings are a collection of three historic manufacturing structures situated along West Ogden and South Keeler Avenues on the border of the Little Village and Lawndale Community Areas. The group of buildings were the former headquarters of Western Felt Works and the Turner Manufacturing Company, both successful Chicago companies that provided essential goods to the nation throughout the twentieth century.

The buildings display characteristics emblematic of Chicago industrial design from the 1910s and 1920s, and have retained a significant level of architectural integrity. Most

Ogden-Keeler Industrial Buildings

Western Felt Works

Address: **4115 W. Ogden Avenue**

Architect: **R.C. Fletcher**

Date: **1916**

Style: **Prairie School**

Turner Manufacturing Company

Address: **4147-4151 W. Ogden; 2309-2325 S. Keeler**

Architect: **Alfred S. Alschuler**

Date: **1918 - 1921**

Style: **Prairie School and Classical Revival**

Neighborhood: **North Lawndale**



Ogden-Keeler Industrial Buildings, Western Felt Works, 1916, R.C. Fletcher, 4115 W. Ogden Avenue. Photo credit: Ward Milller

notably, the Turner Manufacturing Company buildings were designed by acclaimed Chicago architect Alfred S. Alschuler. Despite the architectural legacy that the Ogden Keeler Buildings preserve, these three structures are today threatened with demolition. Current owners seek to create a blocks-long logistics warehouse that will permanently alter the streetwall of this portion of Ogden Avenue, part of the original famed Route 66. Preservation Chicago urges the landmarking of these buildings and recommends their incorporation into the proposed development.

HISTORY: Western Felt Works

Western Felt Works was founded in 1899 by New York-born Henry Faurot. Beginning his career as an employee of Armour & Company, a leading firm in Chicago meatpacking, Faurot eventually came to direct Armour's Curled Hair and Felt Works. Faurot oversaw the construction process of a new factory building for Armour's Curled Hair and Felt, completed in 1898, but an 1899 fire resulting in multiple deaths caused Faurot to step away from the company. Shortly after this catastrophic blaze, Faurot established a new business venture of his own: Western Felt Works at 787-797 Canal Street.

The company quickly found success, and within just a few years was producing an immense range of products. With felt as their core material, Western Felt Works manufactured a variety of items, from horse saddles, automobile washers, phonograph turntables, to robe linings. Due to Western Felt Works' ability to efficiently provide hundreds of products to many other businesses, the company grew tremendously and eventually needed to expand. In 1916, Western Felt Works relocated to a new factory building at 4115 W. Ogden Avenue by architect R.C. Fletcher, who designed other industrial buildings around Chicago.

Chicago 7: Ogden Keeler Industrial Buildings



Ogden-Keeler Industrial Buildings, Western Felt Works, 1916, R.C. Fletcher, 4115 W. Ogden Avenue, a 2024 Chicago 7 Most Endangered.

Photo credit: Ward Miller / Preservation Chicago

By 1928, Western Felt Works had become a nationwide operation with business offices in New York City, Detroit, Cleveland, San Francisco, and St. Louis. This was followed by their greatest era of financial success and name brand recognition amid World War II, owing to the company's newly established production of wartime goods. As the war strained the supply of much-needed materials like rubber, leather, and plastics, manufacturers discovered that wool felt could be used as a suitable substitute for many of these sorely needed items. Felt footwear protected soldiers' feet in frigid temperatures while felt-lined aviator helmets protected pilots from the elements. Felt was also found to make an excellent cushion for gun turret mounts and as insulation to help soften mechanical vibrations in airplanes and tanks. During the war felt was used for airplane life rafts, ammunition cases, and gas mask filters for both troops and horses. Through these varied uses, felt becoming an essential wartime material with Western Felt Works becoming one of its central manufacturers.

In response to the wartime rubber shortage, Western Felt works created Acadia Synthetic Products, a subsidiary that produced a rubber substitute which quickly became one of the company's most lucrative products. Among the most notable products manufactured by this new division was Saran, the production of which was licensed to Western Felt Works by the Dow Chemical Company. The flexible and durable material—most famous today for lending its name to Saran Wrap—was also employed in the production of fuel and oil lines much like those found in airplanes. With the company's continued growth, the Western Felt Works building complex was gradually expanded over the years following the second World War. By the 1950s, Western Felt Works occupied a large industrial site, consisting of multiple buildings with the original Fletcher-designed warehouse at its center.

The company's influence only continued to grow into the 1950s and beyond, weathering a change in leadership and a series of labor protests, which were eventually settled by the National Labor Relations Board in favor of Western Felt Works employees. At this point, Western Felt Works was an industry leader in felt, which remained in high

"We Make the Felt"

Manufacturers of Felt Washers, Gaskets, Strips, Etc., Used by Mechanical Trades; Also Tailoring, Pennant, Millinery, Saddlery, Silo, Drawer Lining, Table Covering and Shoe Felts



WESTERN FELT WORKS
4031 to 4117 OGDEN AVENUE, CHICAGO

BRANCHES: NEW YORK BOSTON CLEVELAND DETROIT ST. LOUIS SAN FRANCISCO

"We Make the Felt" Western Felt Works magazine advertisement from 1925. Image credit: Manufacturers News; a weekly journal devoted to the industrial and general business interests of the middle west, v.28 no.24, 1925

demand in the postwar years, its uses ranging from clothing to car manufacturing. By the 1970s, Western Felt Works suffered from declining sales, and in 1978, the company was sold to Lydall, Inc., leading to its subsequent closure.

HISTORY: Turner Manufacturing Company

The Turner Manufacturing Company was founded by August Turner, born August Tarkovsky, who arrived in Chicago from present-day Ukraine in 1885 at the age of 22. According to the 1933 book *Chicago And Its Jews: A Cultural History*, when Turner immigrated "the only wealth he brought with him consisted of a profound knowledge of Hebrew literature, a fine mind and a forceful character." He found early work gilding picture frames before going into business for himself, incorporating Tarkovsky & Co. in 1891. A year later, the company had become Globe Molding Works, and led to the 1896 founding of the Great Northern Molding Works.

In 1902, the Great Northern Molding Works opened a six-story warehouse at 1444 South Sangamon. Along their growing financial success, the company faced early labor challenges. A picture frame workers strike hit the warehouse over a union agreements dispute in 1904: Great Northern Molding Works had instituted a 10-hour day while employees argued they had been promised a 9-hour day by their union. The strike lasted for nearly a half-year before the company agreed to the union's terms. By 1907, Turner had incorporated the Turner Manufacturing Company which remained at their Sangamon location for at least another decade or more. While Turner's business became wildly lucrative in the early years of the 20th century, Turner continued his contribution and commitment to Chicago's Jewish community. Turner helped to maintain the library of the Hebrew Literary Society and advised the Jewish Home for the Aged as a board member.

Chicago 7: Ogden Keeler Industrial Buildings

By the time Turner passed in 1924, the Turner Manufacturing Company was one of the most prominent manufacturers of picture frames and other decorative pieces in the United States. Before his passing, Turner oversaw the opening of a new complex located along West Ogden Avenue. The large warehouse at 4147-4151 W. Ogden Avenue, the complex's first structure, was designed by prominent Chicago architect Alfred S. Alschuler and built on land acquired from the nearby Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy Railroad between 1917 and 1918. After it was constructed, the warehouse was touted as the "largest factory in the world devoted to the manufacturing of Portrait Frames, Mirror and Pictures Frames of all kinds."

Alschuler is one of Chicago's most important architects. Born in Chicago and educated at the Armour Institute of Technology (today, the Illinois Institute of Technology), he was trained in the offices of Dankmar Adler before opening his own practice in 1907. Although the architect best known for grand designs like the London Guarantee Building (1922) and KAM Isaiah Israel (1924), Alschuler earned a name for himself with his earlier designs for commercial and industrial buildings. Alschuler fully embraced reinforced concrete construction in many of his building designs. These buildings' external expressions often reflected the powerful concrete structure found within, best exemplified by his Florsheim Shoe Company Building (1926) at 3963 W. Belmont, now a Designated Chicago Landmark, as well as the Chicago Printed String Company Building (1928) at 2300 Logan Boulevard. However, the Ogden-Keeler buildings have a heavy-timber mill construction design.



Ogden-Keeler Industrial Buildings, Turner Manufacturing Company Building, 4147-4151 W. Ogden, Alfred S. Alschuler, 1918 – 1921. Photo credit: Max Chavez / Preservation Chicago

The completion of Turner Manufacturing's new home on Ogden came at an unfortunate time for the company. In 1918, wartime materials shortages impacted the company's output, leading to the buildings near immediate lease to Sears, Roebuck & Company to be used warehouses. An announcement in *Manufacturers' News* that same year noted that with the leasing of their Alschuler building, the Turner Manufacturing Company decided to build a second structure on the west side of the block for their own use. This is most certainly a reference to the warehouse structure soon to be built for the Turner Manufacturing Company at 2309-2325 S. Keeler in 1921, also by Alschuler. It was said that Turner and Alschuler were personal friends.

While the Turner Manufacturing Company Buildings are mill construction—rather than reinforced concrete—they are still representative of one of Alschuler's central architectural contributions: his ability to create muscular yet



Ogden-Keeler Industrial Buildings, Turner Manufacturing Company Building, 4147-4151 W. Ogden, Alfred S. Alschuler, 1918 – 1921, a 2024 Chicago 7 Most Endangered. Photo credit: Max Chavez / Preservation Chicago

elegant exteriors that beautify the industrial zones they are sited in. Both Alschuler structures share a similar visual appearance, with the Keeler structure serving as a larger-scale version of its Ogden counterpart. A fusion of Prairie School and Classical Revival, the buildings feature limestone ornaments and subtle brickwork, fitting neatly alongside some of Alschuler's finest industrial designs.

Once settled in their new home, Turner Manufacturing came to be associated with extremely popular, mass-produced frames, mirrors, wall plates, shadow boxes, and other wall decorations. By the 1950s, under the leadership of Turner's grandson, Francis DeKoven (President of the company from 1933 to 1959 and Board Chairman until 1963), the Turner Manufacturing Company became famous for high-end reproductions of famous artworks. A 1952 Chicago Tribune article lists "El Greco, Rembrandt, da Vinci, Hans Holbein, Brueghel, Gauguin, and Matisse" as just a few of the artists that Turner Manufacturing Company was making available to households nationwide. Alongside their reproductions, the company found the production of original pieces profitable as well, including their popular "Flamingo" series. The company was acquired and eventually dissolved by the late 1970s.

Thanks to their popularity in midcentury America, Turner pieces can still be found today, and their cultural value continues to grow. Today, Turner frames and artworks are popular and sought-after collector's items, sometimes fetching thousands of dollars for a single piece. These extant Alschuler buildings, more than just symbols of Chicago's industrial might, also exist as testaments to the cultural and artistic legacy of the Turner Manufacturing Company.



Ogden-Keeler Industrial Buildings, Turner Manufacturing Company Building, 4147-4151 W. Ogden, Alfred S. Alschuler, 1918 – 1921. Photo credit: Ward Miller / Preservation Chicago

THREATS

The Ogden Keeler Industrial Buildings, along with multiple other neighboring structures, are currently threatened with demolition as part of a substantial warehouse redevelopment project that would extend along Ogden Avenue from Keeler Avenue to Pulaski Road. The proposal, led by IDI Logistics, envisions a 246,200 square foot structure on a nearly 15-acre site that would necessitate the demolition of long-standing buildings that have housed dozens of small, local businesses for decades.

Recent community engagement meetings led by IDI Logistics have indicated that reuse of these structures—or even preservation of the facades and other significant architectural elements—is not being considered at this time. The environmental impacts of demolition alongside the construction of the logistics warehouse itself and ensuing truck traffic, are of environmental concern and must be carefully considered.

West Ogden Avenue was part of the iconic Route 66 journey in and out of Chicago. One of the joys of this legendary roadway has always been the variety of sites and architecture that dot its landscape. From motels to diners, industry to nature, Route 66 has been a celebration of America's finest places since its founding in 1926. The Ogden Keeler Industrial Buildings and their innovative manufacturing histories are part of that legacy; losing them to a severe, windowless development would only serve to lessen the architectural identity of Route 66 and harm the surrounding North Lawndale, South Lawndale, and Little Village communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The construction of this proposed logistics center would be harmful to both the residents and architectural and manufacturing histories of the surrounding community. Preservation Chicago recommends that this logistics center not move forward in its current proposed location, instead opting for a more industrially dense area, one that would not impose such detrimental impacts on adjacent Chicagoans. Demolition of industrial structures in the area—the notoriously dangerous Crawford Power Plant demolition in particular—have raised concerns about the impacts of legacy industry on West Side communities of color. This proposal continues that damaging pattern of perpetuating environmental injustice.

However, if this proposal does move forward, incorporation of these historic structures into the new warehouse is imperative to the history and visual appeal of the neighborhood. We call on IDI Logistics to explore sensible, creative approaches, whether through retrofitting these buildings as satellite facilities or preserving the historic facades and signature exterior elements, to establish the campus' connection to this area's storied industrial past.



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Whatever the outcome, we believe that further transparency and environmental accountability will be necessary throughout the process of this proposal's review. Per IDI Logistics, a tenant has not been secured for this warehouse, meaning that this proposal is by all indications speculative. When the fate of community health and safety hangs in the balance, it is hard to justify large-scale projects that have no certain occupant. On the other hand, if a tenant has indeed been secured, this raises further concerns about why this crucial information would be concealed. The proposal as it stands poses far too many risks for Little Village and North Lawndale and we ask that it be more carefully considered so as to mitigate the most deleterious effects on the health, architecture, and history of this corridor.