HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
Historic Landmark Case No. 21-01

A. Loffler Provisions Company
3701 Benning Road NE
Square 5044, Lot 807

Meeting Date: December 3, 2020
Applicant: Advisory Neighborhood Commission 7F
Affected ANC: 7F

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board not designate the A. Loffler Provisions Company building a historic landmark, mainly because of its diminished integrity. HPO does not recommend that the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places.

The present building was constructed in 1915-1916 for the sons of Andreas Löffler as their sausage-making and lard rendering and packaging plant. It was designed by Oscar Vogt, a local and largely commercial and industrial architect. Vogt had also prepared the plans for the latest incarnation of the adjacent and oft burned Washington Abattoir Company slaughterhouse, in which Löffler and his family-held company had a partial ownership interest.

To feed a growing population, the District of Columbia developed a number of stockyards for cattle herded in from out of the city. Perhaps the most notable was Drover's Rest in the Palisades, which operated for most of the nineteenth century and principally supplied small-scale butchers scattered around the outskirts of Georgetown. Nearer downtown was Clark's Depot for swine. There were small, farm-based slaughterhouses elsewhere in the District, of course, and the arrival of railroad lines brought new stockyards to Northeast, in the area of "Benning's Station." Concerns about the pollution of the water supply at the Washington Aqueduct's distributing reservoir was responsible for the closing of Drover's Rest. Competition, the distance from other stockyards, and their own pollution closed the Georgetown-area slaughterhouses. A simultaneous legislative push to consolidate animal-slaughtering operations in Washington and other cities induced the formation of privately owned "union" stockyards and abattoirs, just as "union" railroad stations rationalized and reduced the urban footprint of mass transportation.

Andreas Löffler immigrated from Germany after the Civil War and started a sausage-making firm in Brightwood in 1872, improving upon its physical plant over the years. As many local butchers were being forced out of the wholesale meat business by competition and regulations, Löffler vertically integrated by cooperating with other meat, sausage and lard dealers in the purchase and operation of a large slaughterhouse in Northeast, next to the rail line. When he died in 1905, Löffler's sons continued both businesses.

The A. Loffler Provisions Company was thus closely related to this slaughterhouse and its stockyards, of course: it was the reason he purchased his interest and relocated the sausage plant immediately next door. His was not the only, or even the earliest factory of its kind, but the operation is significant in the story of the processing of meat and its byproducts in Washington, and for Washington. Sausage was popular enough in the local diet and, in the early twentieth century, lard remained an even more important item as a cooking medium and shortening. Still, the refining of these byproducts was subsidiary to the central function occurring at the slaughterhouse—the killing of cattle and cutting it into fresh (and purportedly sanitary) meat for human consumption, much of which was distributed by the Keane Company, another part owner.

Although having the sausage plant next door was extremely efficient, it was not necessary; Löffler's own, earlier plant was not nearby, nor was that of erstwhile abattoir partner Nicholas Auth. It is clear that, together or apart, the slaughterhouse function was necessary for the subsequent processing of byproducts, rather than the other way around.[1] In fact, the stock pens and sheds—the most ephemeral structures of the complex—were probably the essential feature; the abattoir next most important; and the rendering and sausage plant the tertiary feature.

After Auth had pulled out of the company, the slaughterhouse continued to supply both the Loffler and Keane companies. Löffler's company advertised its plant and products using the more impressive backdrop of the more extensive operation next door. But as the Loffler company plant was erected, another innovation was occurring that would eventually supersede most such hometown factories. Where boxcars had long carried in live cattle, refrigerator cars were now increasingly bringing frozen sides of beef and pork and other meat products from Chicago, Cincinnati and Omaha, which possessed advantages in accessibility to stock raising and slaughtering at a large scale. Chicago-based Armour and Company established its own plant off Benning Road. Acquired by Adolph Gobel, Inc. in 1928, the Loffler plant ceased operation in 1933, only seventeen years after construction. Subsequently, it was put to various industrial and warehouse uses.

The nomination is correct that this is the last remnant of a "once vibrant industrial meat packing complex." But it was not a direct subsidiary of the all-important slaughterhouse, and neither its longevity nor its use commend it as the most important structure of the complex. It is said that, at one point, 75 percent of the city's meat came through the next-door slaughterhouse, but the same cannot be said of the sausage factory. One could justifiably argue that it takes on more significance for being the last associated building, but the other edge of that sword is that the loss of stockyards and slaughterhouse rob this plant of a considerable amount of integrity of setting and, therefore, much of that association and feeling.

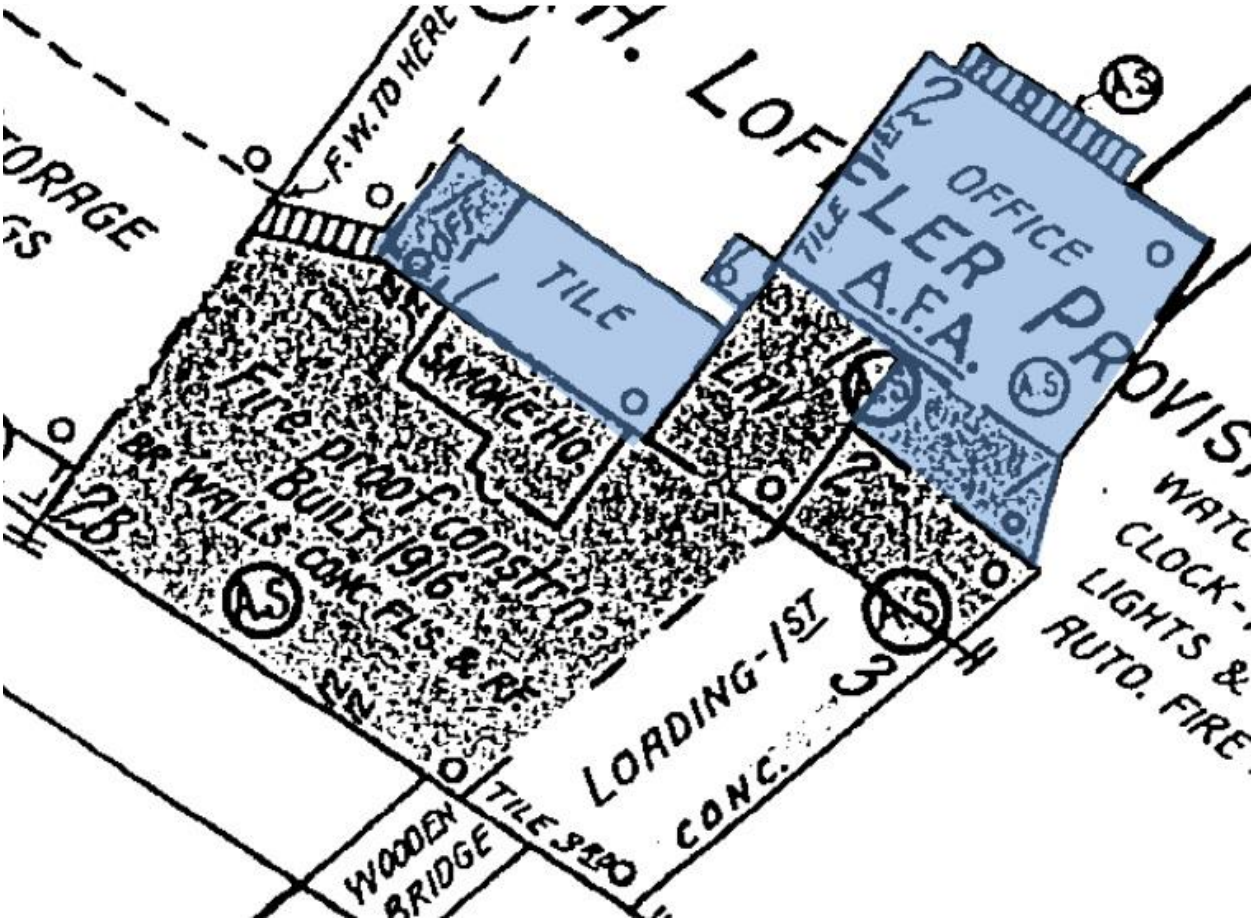
Sausage making may be an especially apt subject for Washington, D.C., but in light of the history of the Benning Road complex, the sausage plant itself is properly seen as one of many small industrial plants that were not export industries, but producing for local consumption. This is not to dismiss its significance, but set it in comparison to other extant facilities such as commercial bakeries and printing plants, some of which have been landmarked. In terms of the

[1] From the slaughterhouse came other byproducts not further refined by Löffler: hides, bones (mostly for fertilizer), etc.

local and National Register criteria for historical significance, the property is of middling importance, perhaps enough for designation, barring integrity issues.

But there are integrity issues. Comparatively, the Loffler plant's physical and historic integrity are degraded. The building is in its original location, retaining a relationship to the rail line. But the railroad served the stockyards directly and the sausage plant only indirectly, as the finished products were trucked locally. As its context has changed markedly, the setting has lost integrity, as discussed above, diminishing the building's feeling and association, which are further diminished by the lack of any obvious signs of the original use, with the possible exception of the chimneys.

The straightforward design and materials—concrete and brick structure and exterior (with a wood-framed uppermost floor)—largely remain, but with a major asterisk. Comparing the present building to the historic photograph in the nomination, it appears that as much as a third of the original footprint has been demolished. The below detail from the 1928 Sanborn insurance atlas has been partly shaded in blue to indicate the extent of demolition of the original plant to date. The areas shaded black/gray in the original and the white loading docks remain. The demolished portions appear to have included the main office over cold storage, plus some ancillary spaces.



With a building as plain as this one, the character and integrity of the remaining elements becomes even more important. The original windows are gone, and the replacements do not replicate them. Many of the window and door openings have been sealed completely or partially. There's no identifying sign, no associated equipment, just a structure that looks like a warehouse. Even the present Moderne-ish paint job outlining the openings on the southeast façade make the building appear later than it is, and the paint coating robs the brick there of its original texture. A rehabilitation of the building would entail further loss of fabric, as the street-facing southeast wall has numerous structural cracks, at all levels, including the parapet, and running up the south corner. The building is a remnant of a remnant, and not a compelling candidate for designation under the local and National Register criteria for architecture as a strong example of building type.