ABSTRACT

Title of Document:	"Woven in Time: Defining the Historical Significance of the Knitting Mills for National Register Consideration"
	Megan Ravert, Master of Community Planning and Master of Historic Preservation, Spring 2025
Directed By:	Dr. Susan Kern, Historic Preservation Program
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This project examines the eligibility of the Knitting Mills campus in Reading, Pennsylvania, for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). An early contributor to the American textile industry through the Wyomissing Industries, the Knitting Mills campus contributed to local economic development and shaped the social fabric of Reading throughout the 20th century. Despite its historical significance, the site has yet to be formally evaluated for consideration on the National Register of Historic Places. This study will analyze the site in the context of the NRHP criteria to assess whether the site meets the standards of designation based on historical significance, architectural design, and community impact.

WOVEN IN TIME: DEFINING THE HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE KNITTING MILLS FOR NATIONAL REGISTER CONSIDERATION

By

Megan Ravert

Final Project submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Architecture,
Planning and Preservation, University of Maryland, College Park,
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Historic Preservation,
Spring 2025

Acknowledgements

I want to express my deepest gratitude to my family for their unwavering support and encouragement throughout this journey. Thank you, my friends, for your understanding and motivation during challenging times. I also extend my sincere appreciation to my colleagues, whose insights and collaboration have been invaluable to the completion of this project.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This project examines the eligibility of the Knitting Mills campus in Wyomissing, Pennsylvania, for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). An early contributor to the American textile industry, the Knitting Mills campus contributed to local economic development and shaped the Reading, Pennsylvania region's social fabric throughout the 20th century. Despite its historical significance, the site has yet to be formally evaluated for NRHP status. This study will analyze the site in the context of the NRHP criteria to assess whether the site meets the standards of designation based on historical significance, architectural design, and community impact.

1.1 Background

The current Knitting Mills campus in Wyomissing, Pennsylvania, sits on the site of a historic textile manufacturing campus founded by Ferdinand Thun and Henry Janssen in 1906. The property housed three companies within Wyomissing Industries: the Berkshire Knitting Mill, Textile Machine Works, and the Narrow Fabric Company. Wyomissing Industries became one of the largest manufacturing mills in the world and a significant employer for the region.

In the 1940s, the Wyomissing Industries operations closed due to economic pressures in the changing industrial landscape of the United States. The property and its numerous buildings were empty until the early 1960s, when the Vanity Fair Corporation purchased the campus and renovated the landscape for retail space, which would be the catalyst for a large-scale, first-of-its-kind factory outlet center. This redevelopment proved highly fruitful as it became a popular shopping experience for visitors throughout the Mid-Atlantic region. The energy for outlet shopping was maintained throughout the early 2000s, but by 2010, the fanfare had worn off.

Equus Capital Partners reimagined the property in 2016, turning it into a mixed-use campus named The Knitting Mills.

Based on the site's industrial history, in combination with existing architecture and significance to the development of Wyomissing, I am pursuing a determination of eligibility that will support the Pennsylvania State Historic Preservation Office in determining if the site qualifies for the National Register of Historic Places. Given the ties to industrial history and the presence of six original buildings within the Knitting Mills campus, this site will be documented as an industrial district named the Knitting Mills Industrial District. An industrial district is defined by structures and features documenting an area's past industrial activity. These districts often showcase buildings, machinery, and floor layouts that reflect manufacturing, mills, and transportation industries. [1]

Figure 1. View facing south of the Knitting Mills campus, 2021. Courtesy of Equus Capital Partners.

[1] Virginia Department of Historic Resources, "127-0457," *Virginia Landmarks Register*, n.d. https://www.dhr.virginia.gov/historic-registers/127-0457/.

The Knitting Mills Industrial District's significance spans from 1906, when the facility opened, through approximately the early 2000s, when operations began to decline due to changes in the textile industry and global economic shifts. This led to the reinvention of space as the Vanity Fair Outlet Center. This period captures the mill's founding, expansion, peak production years, and influence on the industrial, financial, and social development of Wyomissing and the surrounding region.

1.2 Determination of Eligibility

Completing the Determination of Eligibility (DOE) for the National Register of Historic Places is the first step in determining the property's potential for inclusion in the historical record. As amended, the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, 16 U.S.C. 470 et seq., and E.O. 11593 states that "A determination of eligibility is a decision by the Department of the Interior that a district, site, building, structure or object meets the National Register criteria for evaluation although the property is not formally listed in the National Register." Legislation states that a district, directly impacting the site of interest, as "a geographically definable area, urban or rural, possessing a significant concentration, linkage, or continuity of sites, buildings, structures, or objects united by past events or aesthetically by plan or physical development." [2] For industrial districts, this includes buildings within a defined geographic area that have contributed to manufacturing and industry.

Listing properties on the National Register of Historic Places offers two distinct opportunities for property owners that aid in the preservation and longevity of these places. The first opportunity for property owners is eligibility for consideration to acquire State grants that

[2] U.S. Government Publishing Office, Title 36: Parks, Forests, and Public Property, Electronic Code of Federal Regulations, last modified April 21, 2025, https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-36/chapter-I/part-60.

fund restoration and conservation efforts, such as the Pennsylvania Historic Preservation Tax Credit (HPTC) through the Department of Community and Economic Development. This program "…provides tax credits to qualified taxpayers who will complete the restoration of a qualified historic structure into an income-producing property." [3] Additionally, properties listed on the National Register can obtain historic tax credits for rehabilitation under the Federal Historic Rehabilitation Tax Credit (HTC). In 1976, a decade after the creation of the National Historic Preservation Act, the federal government developed the HTC to incentivize homeowners and developers to renovate historic buildings.

In 1979, the Congress of the United States established that anyone rehabilitating a building aged 20 years or older would receive a 10% tax credit. Over the following decades, this program changed, at one point operating a tiered system for age and tax credit coverage. In 2017, the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act was signed, and further changes were made to HTC, citing that the 20 percent tax credit for certified historic structures must now be claimed evenly over five years starting from the year the building is put into use. At present, "To qualify for the 20 percent credit, a building must be a certified historic structure (buildings individually listed on the National Register of Historic Places or listed as a contributing building in a National Register or state or local historic district certified by the Secretary of the Interior." [4] These financial opportunities enhance the preservation process and offer longevity for historic properties that have contributed significantly to developing a community, like the Knitting Mills campus. This further affirms Wyomissing Industries' distinct history and contributions.

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[3] Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development, "Historic Preservation Tax Credit (HPTC)," last modified July 17, 2024, https://dced.pa.gov/programs/historic-preservation-tax-credit-hptc/.
[4] Novogradac & Company LLP, "About Historic Tax Credit," Novoco Resource Centers, https://www.novoco.com/resource-centers/historic-tax-credits/about-historic-tax-credit.

Chapter 2: Methodology for Research and Documentation

Per the requirements for Determination of Eligibility submissions in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, research and documentation must support the development of the site's physical description, site plan, floor plans, current photos, history, significance, and bibliography. [5] To meet these requirements, this project will utilize archival research, site surveys, and other pertinent documentation to support the Knitting Mills consideration as a historic district.

The evaluation of archival documentation will be the primary source for collecting information on the history of the Berkshire Knitting Mills and Wyomissing Industries. Several agencies, organizations, and individuals have contributed important information to the archival record, which outlines the many facets of this distinct history. Members and contributors to the Wyomissing Historical Society and Wyomissing Foundation have hosted listening sessions, written novels, and collected oral and written histories from community members who worked closely with the Wyomissing Industries.

These first-person accounts and available documentation have aided in a broader understanding of the prominence and operations of the textile industry throughout the region. In addition to oral and written histories of the site, I utilized development plans and site evaluations from the participating construction firms that aided in redeveloping the Knitting Mills campus in 2016. These plans provided background on the preexisting buildings, their restoration, and how existing materials were utilized to restore the property's structures.

[5] Marissa Barrett, "SHPO's Updated Determination of Eligibility Guidance," PA Historic Preservation (blog), November 6, 2024, https://pahistoricpreservation.com/shpos-updated-determination-eligibility-guidance/.:contentReference oaicite:1 index=1.

Site surveys and archival documentation are integral to accurately depicting and interpreting the Knitting Mills campus. Through this process, I have consulted with the site plans made available by the consulting construction firms and have visited the proposed site to photograph, document, and assess what remains today compared to its early development. Documentation included evaluating architectural features, such as brick bond, building height, and features consistent with industrial architecture, to accurately construct a physical description of the buildings included in the proposed historic district. The historical, archival data, and site analysis combined enabled a comprehensive evaluation of the site, fully supporting its consideration for nomination for the National Register of Historic Places.

Chapter 3: Historical Context and Significance

In 1896, two German industrialists, Ferdinand Thun and Henry Janssen, moved their business from a small factory on 200th Street and Cedar Street in Reading to land in Wyomissing. The men, born in Barmen, Germany, had worked in textile manufacturing in New York City. For some time, Thun studied braiding and trimming in Germany. Braiding involves interlacing three or more strands of yarn, thread, or another fabric to create a new fabric or trim. The strands are intertwined at a diagonal, creating a tubular shape that can be added as trim to garments for elegance. [6] After this training, Thun returned to New York and became a superintendent at Sutro Brothers' braid manufacturing, while Janssen worked at the Castle Braid Company in Brooklyn, New York. [7]

Motivated to start his own company, Ferdinand Thun asked Henry Janssen to relocate south to Reading in 1892 to begin their braiding machine business, the Textile Machine Works. In their early days, the company worked to repair and replace German braiding machines, enabling them to gain expertise in manufacturing mechanics. Due to the pressures of the McKinley Tariff of 1890, which increased the average import tax by 50%, the men decided to develop their machinery in the United States, which did not face import pressures like the European companies they worked with. In late 1892, the men constructed their first braiding machine. [8]

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[6] Textile Sphere, "What is Braiding? | Types & Applications," published August 2024, https://www.textilesphere.com/2024/08/what-is-braiding-types-applications.html.
[7] Reading Eagle, "Book Details History of Berks County Business Partners," Reading Eagle, August 12, 2018, https://www.readingeagle.com/2018/08/12/book-details-history-of-berks-county-business-partners/.
[8] SNAC Cooperative, "Vanity Fair Corporation," accessed April 23, 2025, https://snaccooperative.org/view/31742356.

With the success of their braiding machine, the partners decided to relocate their operations to a larger, suburban area five miles outside of the City of Reading. They landed in Wyomissing, purchasing property for one dollar from the Reading Suburban Real Estate Co., where they continued to grow exponentially. Over the next four years, the men expanded their business offerings, beginning to develop braided coverings for wire and cables, a booming industry at the time. The Narrow Fabric Company, the second manufacturing industry to join the Wyomissing Industries, opened on January 2nd, 1900.

Through the early 1900s, the partners' enterprise evolved and developed America's first fully fashioned knitting machine. Full-fashioned knitting machines aim to " … craft the piece directly into its final shape, eliminating the need for cutting and sewing." This method reduces product waste and improves the fit and elasticity of the knitted materials. [9] In 1906, they opened the final industry, the Berkshire Knitting Mill, completing the campus and creating more opportunities for industrial capital.

Over the next several years, hosiery production increased, with 100 machines multiplying to over 1,000 machines in reaction to the consumer need for hosiery during the Roaring Twenties. Fashion from this time provided opportunities for Wyomissing Industries as they innovated using rayon for manufacturing hosiery to accommodate changing trends like shorter skirts. [10] This became the largest full-fashioned knitting mill in the country, selling its billionth stocking in 1941. It remained until shortly after World War II, when the consumer need for nylon products declined, and labor costs grew in competition with cheaper costs in the South.

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[9] Artknit Studios, "Fully Fashioned Knitwear: The Signature of Craftsmanship," Our Stories (blog), accessed April 23, 2025, https://artknit-studios.com/blogs/our-stories/fully-fashioned-knitwear-the-signature-of-craftsmanship.
[10] Wyomissing Foundation, "About Us," accessed April 23, 2025, https://wyomissingfoundation.org/about-us/

Figure 2. Interior view of the Berkshire Knitting Mills factory. Courtesy of Equus Capital Partners.

While the industries declined in the years following World War II, they had lasting impacts on the industrial world. One of the most prominent was the development of the "Reading Knitting Machine," which weighed 22 tons. [11] At 72 feet long and over 240,000 parts, this machine recorded the longest patent with the United States Patent Office in the 1930s. It was eventually built and used in multiple countries, such as Australia, Canada, Germany, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. Over half a century, more than 15,000 "Reading" machines were built and sold to other manufacturers to develop high-quality stockings.

Following the steady decline in full-fashioned knitting, Wyomissing Industries began to consolidate, with the knitting industry essentially ceasing operations. Ferdinand Thun and Henry Janssen passed away in the late 1940s, with their families taking over their assets. The families mutually decided to combine their shares of Berkshire International, the organization created to

[11] The Knitting Mills, "History," accessed April 23, 2025, https://www.knitting-mills.com/history/.

oversee the expanded textile and knitting operations. In the 1960s, Berkshire International was sold to the Vanity Fair Corporation, prompting the eventual outlet center in Wyomissing.

Shortly after acquiring the land and operations of Berkshire International, then Vanity Fair president M.O. Lee began brainstorming ideas on how to clear out and transform the newly acquired buildings. The company decided to host a clean-out sale in 1970 aimed at ridding the buildings of the remaining inventory. The initial sale was popular, prompting the company to host subsequent sales in the weeks following. Realizing the success of these events, Vanity Fair decided to reimagine the buildings to be a factory store, selling surplus Berkshire and Vanity Fair merchandise. [12]

Figure 3. The Vanity Fair Outlet in Reading, 2005. Modified knitting mill buildings repurposed for commercial shopping use, facing west. Photo by Donna Fisher/The Morning Call.

[12] GoReadingBerks, "The Knitting Mills, Wyomissing, PA," last modified August 12, 2018, https://goreadingberks.com/the-knitting-mills-wyomissing-pa/.:contentReference[oaicite:0]{index=0}

This venture turned the once Berkshire Knitting Mill and Wyomissing Industry Site into a first-of-its-kind outlet center. The purpose of the outlet center was to offer goods, normally apparel and accessories, at a reduced cost. By 2001, the Vanity Fair Outlet Center averaged five million visitors per year, with many people traveling from states like Maryland, New York, and New Jersey to shop for clothing and goods. The American Bus Association voted the site the top U.S. Shopping Destination in 1996, as roughly 6,000 buses visited the outlet center. [13]

3.1 Developmental Impact

Wyomissing traces its origins to 1896, when Reading lumber dealer Thomas P. Merritt acquired 600 acres of land, laying the groundwork for the future borough. Soon after, Merritt collaborated with Albert Thalheimer, David H. Keiser, Marthias Mengel, and Levi Walter Mengel to establish the Reading Suburban Real Estate Company, shaping the area's early development. [14] At the same time, Ferdinand Thun and Henry Janssen founded Wyomissing Industries.

The borough's path to incorporation began in 1903 when the local business leaders, Merritt, Thalheimer, Keiser, Thun, and Janssen, met at the Wyomissing Hotel to establish an independent government. Their efforts came together on July 2, 1906, when Wyomissing was officially incorporated, with Ferdinand Thun serving as the first borough council president. As president, Ferdinand Thun had many ideas for Wyomissing, including his vision of a park-like

[13] The Morning Call, "Reading Bags Title of Bus Association's Best Shopping Destination," March 3, 1996, https://www.mcall.com/1996/03/03/reading-bags-title-of-bus-associations-best-shopping-destination/?amp=1.
[14] Reading Eagle, "United States of Berks: Get to Know the History of Wyomissing and How It Got Its Name," July 20, 2020, https://www.readingeagle.com/2020/07/20/united-states-of-berks-get-to-know-the-history-of-wyomissing-and-how-it-got-its-name/.

community with tree-lined streets. [15] By 1909, Wyomissing had gained regional recognition, with the *Reading Herald* declaring it the "Queen of them all" among the boroughs around Reading.

Figure 4. Aerial view of Wyomissing, Pennsylvania, facing north, 1932. Courtesy of Berks Nostalgia.

In 1922, the borough established a planning commission to guide its development. The commission monitored the community's exponential growth, which was heavily driven by the booming industries and the company town that grew around the landscape of the factory buildings. The factory premises included a grocery store, a dispensary, and vegetable gardens, amongst other features that supported employees and their families. Before establishing the planning commission, the partners worked with design firm Hegeman and Peets to create a development plan for Wyomissing. Features of this plan included various housing options for

[15] Werner Hegemann and Elbert Peets, Wyomissing Park: The Modern Garden Suburb of Reading, Pennsylvania; A Steppingstone Towards a Greater Reading; Report and Plans for the Development of the Land under the Control of the Wyomissing Development Company (Reading, PA: Wyomissing Development Company, 1912).

different social classes, offering a blend of detached homes, row homes, and estates set around parks and plazas.[16] This plan was actualized in 1917, with adjustments made through the 1920s.

This development spurred further features around the area, including the Reading Hospital, the Reading Public Museum, and the Buttonwood Street Bridge, all of which were philanthropic contributions from Ferdinand Thun and Henry Janssen. [17] The culmination of the Wyomissing Industries and other developmental changes in the Borough, the Reading Transit Company expanded the Reading Streetcar System into Wyomissing and West Reading. Route number 14, Womelsdorf, 19th and Perkiomen Avenue, traveled from Perkiomen Avenue in Reading westward down Penn Avenue through West Reading to Womelsdorf, then returned eastward, offering transportation to industrial workers who did not have car access. [18] Ferdinand Thun and Henry Janssen's philanthropic contributions and vision for a safe and enjoyable community have impacted the daily lives of residents and passersby. These contributions are a significant result of the partners' hard work and dedication to developing Wyomissing Industries.

3.2 Industrial Workforce and Labor Ties

The Berkshire Knitting Mill was a prominent manufacturer in the development of stockings and played a significant role in bringing light to unfair labor practices in the United States. In the 1930s, labor advocacy for fair pay, worker protection, and reasonable hours became essential platforms for labor unions and workers who felt their efforts were not adequately

[16] GoReadingBerks, "Wyomissing Park was conceived in 1913 by the Wyomissing Development Company..." *Facebook*, https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=902020475305627&id=100064930472406&set=a.555735496600795.
[17] Reading Eagle, "Ferdinand Thun and Henry K. Janssen Were Destined for Shared Success," January 28, 2018, https://www.readingeagle.com/2018/01/28/ferdinand-thun-and-henry-k-janssen-were-destined-for-shared-success/.
[18] The Reading Street Railway Company (1999), Benson W. Rohrbeck, p 119

compensated. [19] In Wyomissing, workers at the Berkshire Knitting Mill felt similar dissatisfaction with their treatment, predominantly because they were non-unionized.

Tensions grew over many years, until workers attempted their first strike in June of 1933 against a company-wide pay cut. [20] Three years later, workers organized additional strikes, one occurring in July 1936 to bring awareness to the company's policy demanding a six-day work week. The July strike started necessary conversations about worker rights. During the 1936 strike, Berkshire Knitting Mills had over 6,000 employees, while the other Wyomissing Industries, Narrow Fabric Company, employed 600, and Textile Machine Works employed 2,500 individuals. [21] These employment numbers show the capacity of potential workers to endure pay and hour concerns that prompted the strikes. These strikes ultimately facilitated an investigation by the Berks County Branch of the American Federation of Hosiery (AFH) Workers to address concerns "so serious as to threaten the wage and hour structure of the entire full-fashioned industry of this country." [22]

As several weeks of investigation and deliberation continued, workers grew more frustrated at the inaction of industry officials and advocacy organizations to make change. On October 1st, 1936, thousands of workers and supporters arrived outside the gates of the Berkshire Knitting Mill to picket against stagnant action for workers' rights. Over a few hours, the picketing turned violent, with many individuals struck with bricks and severely injured, and one

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[19] Melvyn Dubofsky, "Labor Upheaval, Industrial Organization, and the Rise of the CIO," *Bill of Rights Institute*, accessed April 29, 2025, https://billofrightsinstitute.org/essays/labor-upheaval-industrial-organization-and-the-rise-of-the-cio.
[20] Alexa Freyman, "The Deadly Berkshire Knitting Mill Strike of 1936 – Part 1," *Berks Nostalgia*, July 7, 2022, https://berksnostalgia.com/berkshire-knitting-mill-strike-1936-1/.
[21] George H. Edmonds, "Wyomissing: an American dream: enterprise shaping community
[22] Alexa Freyman, "The Deadly Berkshire Knitting Mills Strike of 1936 – Part 2," *Berks Nostalgia*, July 14, 2022, https://berksnostalgia.com/deadly-berkshire-knitting-mills-strike-of-1936-2/.

killed, Martin Earl Schlegel, after leaving his shift at the mill. [23] The strike continued for several months as AFH attempted to facilitate an agreement between workers and company officials. Ultimately, Berkshire Knitting Mill workers slowly returned to work without a promising resolution until almost a decade later. Still, this strike contributed to a larger movement of mill workers across Berks County demanding fair pay and what is now a work-life balance. [24]

Figure 5. Berkshire Knitting Mills strike protestors and onlookers gathered at 8th Street and Reading Avenue, Wyomissing, in the 1930s. Courtesy of Berks Nostalgia.

[23] Ibid
[24] Alexa Freyman, "Deadly Berkshire Knitting Mills Strike," *Berks Nostalgia*, September 2, 2022, https://berksnostalgia.com/deadly-berkshire-knitting-mills-strike-5/.

Chapter 4: Physical Description of the Site

The Knitting Mills, as part of the larger Wyomissing Industrial Park, was developed between 1906 and 1946, and facilitated two company towns: one within the greater region of Wyomissing, and the other between Penn Avenue and Van Reed Road. The partners had a “Germanic sensitivity” to cleanliness, neatness, and aesthetics in their buildings and surrounding areas, aiming for their industrial “park” to complement the residential “park” of Wyomissing. This vision resulted in brick buildings, underground tunnels to hide utility lines and offer transportation, and tree-lined landscapes with green space for vegetation.

The buildings, streets, and sidewalks were well conceived, allowing for an ease of access between industries, and ensuring moderate space between the industry's edge and the main thoroughfare of Penn Avenue, aiding in maintaining an aesthetic separation of industry and recreation. In the 1920s, five auxiliary buildings were constructed parallel to the two Berkshire Knitting Mill buildings. These buildings were much smaller and aimed to draw contrast from the taller factory buildings, with uses like the cafeteria, dispensary, and parking garages. At this time, there were thirteen buildings on the site. Five buildings were used as a hosiery mill, three as finishing spaces, and the remainder for auxiliary purposes.

Upon evaluating Wyomissing Industries' historical site, one prominent feature stood out compared to other company towns: the lack of on-site housing for employees and their families. The buildings on site are aligned with the traditional features of a company town, the large mill buildings, and smaller auxiliary buildings featuring the cafeteria and grocery store. Through the evaluation of documentation, there is no direct mention of employee housing within the confines of Wyomissing Industries; instead, the focus was on the development of the Wyomissing

Borough, including residential housing, schools, and recreation space. This lack of housing provides insight into the unique nature of Wyomissing Industries and the Knitting Mill campus.

4.1 Knitting Units

The knitting operations were split into three units – two units handled the knitting of the stockings, while the third unit housed the finishing operations. The fabric materials were received on the first floor of Build 201, demolished during the 1960s. The materials were retrieved from the throwsters, who twist silk filaments into a thread. [25], and on cones, cylindrical or conical-shaped spools on which thread is wound for storage or use in knitting machines. [26] The fabric was taken to a conditioning or humidifying room to ensure the fabric reached the proper moisture content for knitting. After conditioning, the materials were moved to the legging department, in Buildings 101, 102, 103, 201, or 202, where the leg of the stocking was knitted. The legging department was on the building's third, fourth, and fifth floors.

Once the legs were knitted on the legging floors, the product was moved to the footing department, which occupied the second floor of Buildings 101, 102, and 103, and the first floor of Buildings 201 and 202. The stockings were moved from the legging and footing department buildings to the finishing building via rubber-tired hand trucks. Their first stop in the finishing unit was the second floor, which housed the looping and seaming department, where the stocking heel and toe were closed, and non-looped edges were joined. The complete stockings were moved to Building 108 to await the dyeing process on the top floor of Building 105. Once dyed and dried, the stockings were taken to the boarding floor of Building 106, then to the pairing

[25] Vocabulary.com, "Throwster," https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/throwster#:~:text=Definitions%20of%20throwster,synonyms:%20thrower.
[26] ScienceDirect, "Cone Yarn," https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/engineering/cone-yarn.

floor on the fourth floor. After being matched, the product continued down the levels of Building 106, where they were stamped, ticketed, and packed before being shipped out via mail, rail, or truck to consumers. [27]

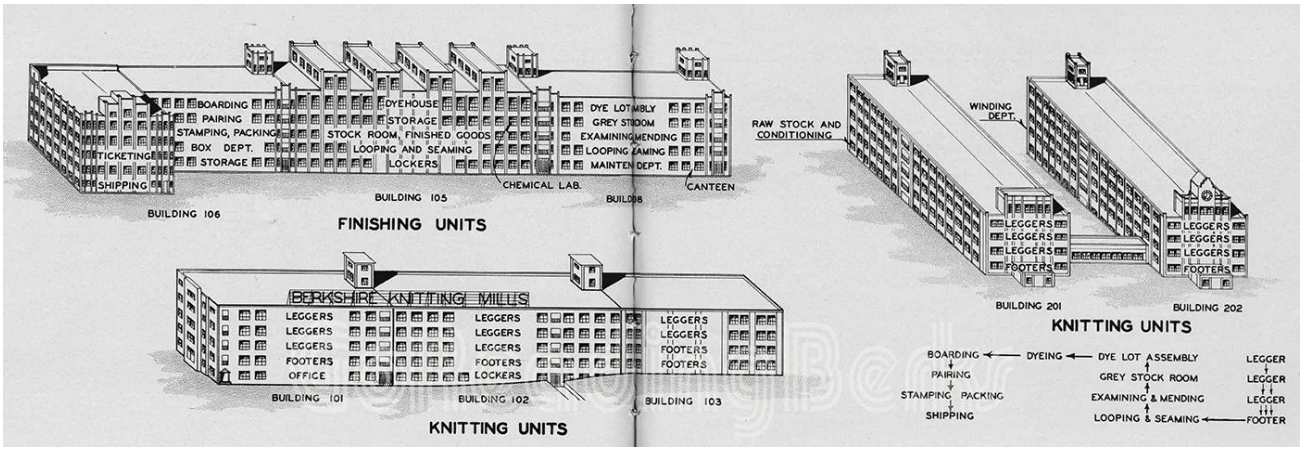

Figure 6. Drawing of building operations and floor usage at the Berkshire Knitting Mills, n.d. Courtesy of GoReadingBerks.

The structure of the buildings and the operation ensured a seamless, logical production order. Each floor of every building served a purpose in producing and transporting goods, which was achievable due to the closeness of the factory building and the ease of access provided by the underground tunnels when needed. The later inclusion of the auxiliary buildings in the front maintained the closeness of employees to the factory buildings, ensuring that time and productivity were prioritized.

[27] GoReadingBerks, "The Knitting Mills, Wyomissing, PA," last modified August 12, 2018, https://goreadingberks.com/the-knitting-mills-wyomissing-pa/.

4.2 Auxiliary Buildings

The auxiliary buildings on the Knitting Mill site's south side housed non-industrial operations such as a cafeteria, dispensary, laboratory, and parking garages. They were designed to be much smaller than the larger mill buildings and maintained a similar brick design across all five. The cafeteria building occupied the largest space, welcoming 1,200 employees daily and serving them in under thirteen minutes. The medical dispensary offered health care to employees, such as dental care and routine checkups, and would also aid injured employees. These features supported the company town style typical of industrial plants, creating easy access for employees to live and work. Following the closure of the Berkshire Knitting Mill, the auxiliary and knitting units ceased operation and were later purchased by the Vanity Fair Corporation, ultimately serving as commercial retail stores.

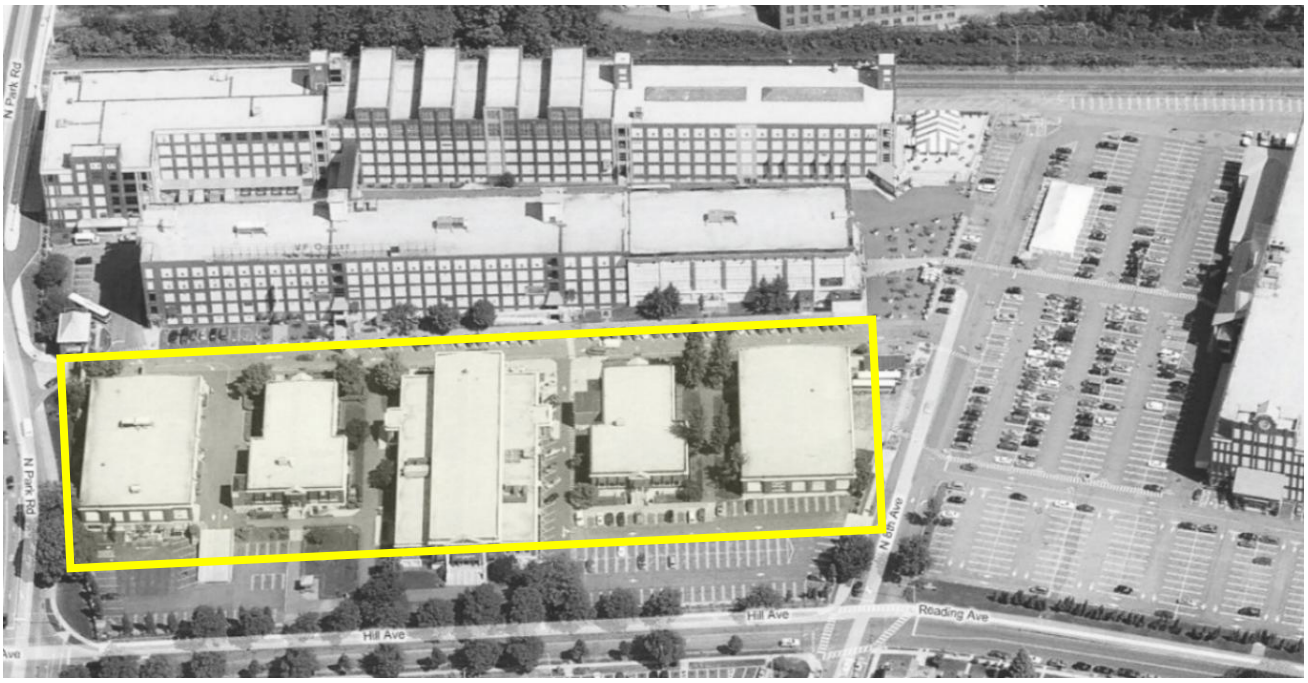

Figure 7. Aerial view of the Knitting Mills site, 2020, facing north. Auxiliary buildings are highlighted in yellow. Courtesy of Stuart + Associates.

4.3 Vanity Fair Outlet Center Era

In the 1970s, the Vanity Fair Corporation acquired the Berkshire Knitting Mill buildings in Wyomissing with the intent of redevelopment. After hosting a one-day merchandise clearing sale, the company decided to pivot its redevelopment plan and instead put its efforts into operating a large-scale, first-of-its-kind outlet center. At the time of acquisition, thirteen buildings were on the property, offering ample space for commercial growth. In the 1970s, the company demolished Building 201 to accommodate patron parking to the left of Building 202. Inside the remaining buildings, large windows were sealed, and walls were constructed for product placement and people's movement.

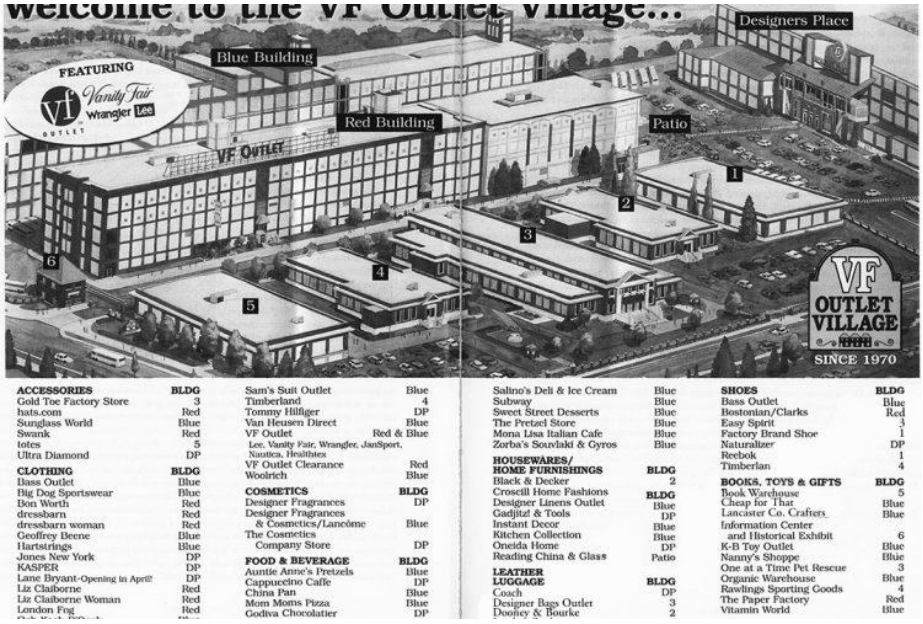

Figure 8. VF Outlet Village directory with renumbered buildings, n.d. Courtesy of the American Business History Center.

Figure 9. Ground-level view of the knitting units with plastered window openings. Courtesy of Travel with Pen and Palate.

4.4 Knitting Mill Campus

Following the steady decline and eventual sale of the Vanity Fair Outlet Center, Equus Capital Partners bid on and acquired the property for redevelopment. The project aimed to reimagine the site by highlighting its historical features. The conceptual site plan (Figure 10) shows which buildings were intended for reuse and where existing buildings would be demolished compared to early site photos. This project saw the demolition of Buildings 109 and the Knitting Unit that operated Buildings 101, 102, and 103, affectionately known as the Red Building during the Vanity Fair era, to accommodate more on-site parking for patrons and employees. The following building descriptions represent the remaining, contributing structures at the Knitting Mills site. They are organized numerically based on the numbering system developed during the Wyomissing Industries era.

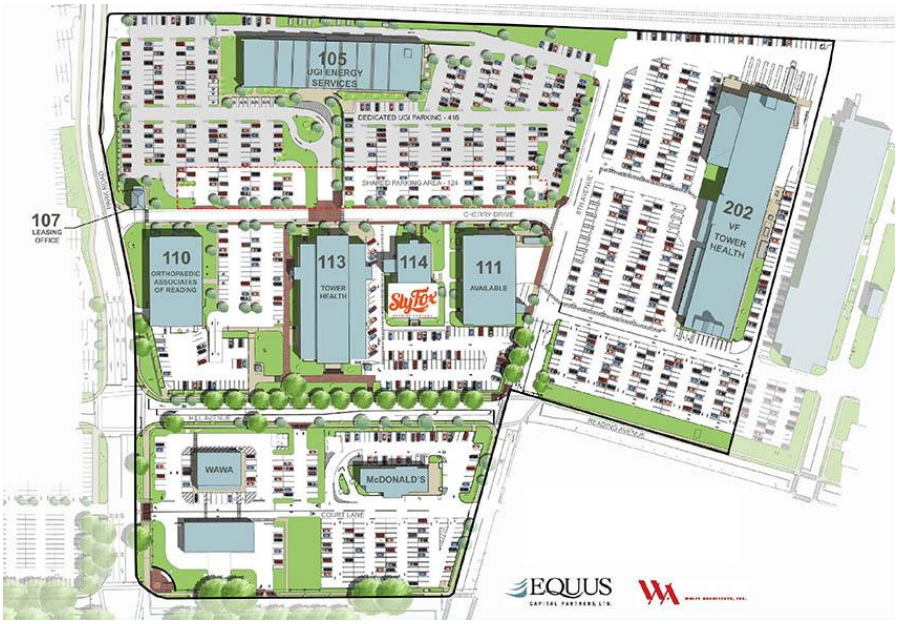

Figure 10. Site plan conceptual drawing. Courtesy of Equus Capital Partners.

4.4.1 Building 105

Building 105, currently operated by UGI Energy, was constructed in 1930 as the Dye House for Berkshire Knitting Mills, as noted in a 1951 employee manual. This five-story, 20-bay structure features a running bond brick pattern. Stacked steel-frame ribbon windows on each floor characterize the front of the building. Towards each end of the structure, one bay has window-sized openings that allow light and air into a stairwell. The building is topped with a flat roof. The structure's design incorporates stone sills and caps. The four-story block is interrupted by four two-bay vertical projections, creating a series of four flat-roofed monitors that raise an additional story and allow light and ventilation for the upper story dye floor. The ends of the building are now covered in a grey stone pattern, filling the wall space where wings were removed. The sides feature large, industrial four-glass-panel ribbon windows.

Figure 11. Left: Backside view of Building 105, facing southwest, 1930s. Courtesy of Partners. Right: View of Building 105, facing north, 2025. Photo by James Ravert.

The raw materials processed in the legging and footing departments of Buildings 201 and 202 were transported for dyeing on the top floor of Building 105. These materials were produced in gray and would undergo coloring in the finishing buildings of 105, 106, and 108. The dyeing department in Building 105 is the only one in the world located on the top level of a mill. This decision was aided by thorough research that concluded that the area would be free from fumes because of four monitor windows on the roof providing ventilation. This design also provided significant sunlight that helped workers view the shades of dyes used on the hosiery. As of 2025, the building has lost the two side units, 106 and 108, present in the 1930s. The windows have been replaced, as the originals were plastered over during the Vanity Fair era for commercial use. The new windows maintain a similar style to the original windows, mimicking the historic nature of the 1930s.

4.4.2 Building 107

Building 107, currently operated as a leasing office, was constructed in 1927 to serve as the telephone exchange. The structure is two stories tall and features a facade with windows on each floor of all four sides. The building has a hipped roof, with eaves that extend outward, creating a subtle overhang above the windows. The building is organized in a 2-bay by 2-bay layout, with the main entrance at one end. A single arcaded walkway within the hipped roof is located on the first floor and offers pedestrian access to the main entrance from the east side.

Figure 12. Left: Side view of Building 107, facing northeast, 1930s. Courtesy of Partners.
Right: View of Building 107, facing north, 2025. Photo by James Ravert.

On the south side, two arched cutouts add a decorative element to the facade. Above these arches, two keystone embellishments are displayed. A belt course runs around the building, emphasizing the structure's horizontal lines and providing a visual break between the first and second stories. A pilaster stands at the right corner of the building. Additionally, a small windowless addition at the rear of the building adds an extension to the original structure. As of 2025, the structure has undergone minimal modifications. The modifications of this structure

include new windows on the ground and second levels and a steel sign on the southern side of the building, identifying it as the Gate House.

4.4.3 Buildings 110 & 111

Two structures on the Knitting Mills campus, constructed in 1925, originally served as parking garages. Building 110, now operated by Orthopedic Associates of Reading, was known as the West Parking Garage. It provided indoor parking for Berkshire Knitting Mill employees, offering a place to park their cars while they worked in the nearby factories. Building 111, now operated by Kimberton Whole Foods, served as the East Parking Garage, supporting additional indoor parking for Wyomissing Industries employees. These garages were integral to accommodate the nearly 2,000 cars parked daily on the property.

Figure 13. Top: Backside view of Building 110, facing southwest, 1930s. Courtesy of Partners. Bottom: View of Building 110, facing northwest, 2025. Photo by James Ravert.

Both buildings feature seven bay windows on the east and west sides and five on the north and south sides. Building 110 stands two stories tall, with access points on the structure's lower south and east sides. The buildings have a common bond, a brick pattern, and rest on a stone foundation. The flat roofs are a defining feature of the structures. The original open breezeways, which allowed airflow through the garages, have been replaced by large, fixed-pane windows. As of 2025, the window openings have been replaced with new windows, differing from the Vanity Fair Era, which had plastered over the original windows to enclose the entire building for commercial use. Further, the fencing connected to the structure in its original form has been removed.

Figure 14. Top: Side view of Building 111, facing southwest, 1930s. Courtesy of Partners. Bottom: View of Building 111, facing north, 2025. Photo by James Ravert.

4.4.4 Building 113

Building 113, now operated by Tower DIRECT, was built in 1926 as a cafeteria. The structure features a common bond pattern and a coarse stone foundation, with tall front windows topped by smaller ones, divided by a decorative course. These single-pane windows line the two-and-a-half-story structure beneath stone banding that adorns the exterior. The building is distinguished by two entrances—one on the southern side and another on the northern side. The center section of the building is slightly elevated, accommodating an additional half-floor space. All the roofs on the structure are flat, while the entrance on the south side is distinguished by a shallow, gabled roof that projects slightly from the flat main roof. As of 2025, the windows have been replaced, with the new ones having fewer panes than the 1930s ones.

Figure 15. Left: View of Building 113, facing west, 1930s. Courtesy of Partners.
Right: View of Building 113, facing north, 2025. Photo by James Ravert.

4.4.5 Building 114

Building 114, now operated by Sly Fox Taphouse, was constructed in 1925 and originally served as a medical dispensary and partially as a recreation hall. Like Building 113, it features a common bond brick pattern, large single-paned windows, and a stone foundation. A stone band runs horizontally above the windows, adding visual interest to the exterior. The building is single-story with a flat roof and two entrances on the north and south sides, with a pitched gable roof above the front entrance on the south side. As of 2024, a wrap-around porch has been added to the east side, enhancing the building's appearance and functionality, while grey door framing has been added to the front entrance, complementing the sleek look of the wrap-around porch.

Figure 16. Top: Front view of Building 114, facing northeast, 1930s. Courtesy of Partners. Bottom: View of Building 114, facing north, 2025. Photo by James Ravert.

4.4.6 Building 202

Building 202, now operated by Tower Health, was constructed in 1928 and housed several Berkshire Knitting Mills' knitting units. Similar in form and material to Building 105, it is a four-story structure with a flat roof and a roof-level observation deck that spans four bays. The building features a running bond brick pattern with 10 bay windows across the front on the second, third, and fourth floors. The bottom floor features the building entrance; the lower windows on the east and west sides remain plastered over from the Vanity Fair era. The front entrance includes a flat awning covering the glass windows and doors. Around the edge of the building's roof is a slight eave. In 2018, the facade underwent repairs and repointing, preserving its historic fabric while stabilizing the exterior for continued use. The redevelopment included a decorative feature that covered the clock feature of the original design.

Figure 17. Left: View of Building 202, facing northeast, 1930s. Courtesy of Berks Nostalgia. Right: View of Building 202, facing north, 2025. Photo by James Ravert.

The raw materials were received on the first floor of the 201 building (no longer standing) and were sorted and moved to the knitting floors of the Berkshire Knitting Mills for production. Negligible amounts of silk, primarily materials over seven thread counts, were taken to the winding room in Building 202. The winding room in the winding department was located on the north side of the building, facing the train tracks. As production occurred in the winding department, the other raw materials were split and worked on in the legging department on the third, fourth, and fifth floors of Buildings 201 and 202. The footer department occupied the second floor of the 202 Building and was the last stop for the leggings before they moved to the finished buildings, one of which is Building 105.

Chapter 5: Evaluation Criteria for National Register Eligibility

Criterion A of the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) applies to properties associated with events, patterns, or trends that have significantly contributed to broad aspects of history. [28] This criterion recognizes sites linked to critical historical themes such as industrialization, transportation, commerce, social movements, or community development. To qualify under Criterion A, a property must be directly connected to events or patterns that shaped history meaningfully, rather than merely existing during a historical period.

The Knitting Mills campus qualifies for consideration on the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A due to its significant role in Wyomissing's industrial and economic history. As one of the largest full-fashioned knitting mills in the United States, the facility was instrumental in expanding the textile industry during the early to mid-20th century. The mill's use of knitting machinery, including seamless stocking knitting technology, positioned it as a leader in innovation. Additionally, its large-scale production contributed to national trade patterns, reflecting broader economic trends in American manufacturing. The mill's success motivated suburban and urban development in Wyomissing and Reading, shaping the built environment and influencing community planning and housing patterns.

While the presence of industry motivated the creation of housing and commerce around the site, Ferdinand Thun and Henry Janssen had a well-rounded and people-focused vision for Wyomissing. Throughout their lives, the men donated money to establish the Reading Hospital and Medical Center, the Reading Public Museum, and the Buttonwood Street Bridge. The

[28] National Park Service, How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, 1990; revised 1991, 1995, 1997), https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/upload/NRB-15_web508.pdf.

Reading Hospital and Medical Center building opened in 1926 on a 36-acre site in West Reading, Pennsylvania, and now operates a Level 1 trauma center that treats more than 133,500 people annually and offers 697 beds in the hospital. [29]

The Reading Public Museum, located next door to the Reading Hospital, opened in 1904 and houses 280,000 objects related to art, science, and civilization, a planetarium, and a 25-acre arboretum. [30] Finally, the Buttonwood Street Bridge, constructed in 1931, connects West Reading to northwest Reading and was inspired by the City Beautiful movement. [31] These contributions are significant because they increased connectivity and supported livability within the Wyomissing and West Reading areas, encouraging more development in and around the factories for housing, education, and commerce.

In addition to the contributions to history mentioned above, reusing the site's buildings for the Vanity Fair Outlet Center was significant to developing outlet shopping centers in the United States. This center and its broad variety of retail options, such as clothing, shoes, and other goods, established a first-of-its-kind shopping experience, offering consumers products at a discounted rate all within one geographic range. This venture invited citizens from neighboring states to shop and experience the area of Wyomissing for decades, solidifying itself as a community asset and regional hub for commerce.

[29] "Reading Hospital." Tower Health. https://towerhealth.org/locations/reading-hospital.
[30] "Reading Public Museum." https://www.readingpublicmuseum.org/.
[31] HistoricBridges.org. "Buttonwood Street Bridge." HistoricBridges.org. Last modified October 20, 2013. https://historicbridges.org/bridges/browser/?bridgebrowser=pennsylvania/buttonwoodstreet/.

Criterion B of the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) applies to properties associated with the lives of people significant in our past. This criterion recognizes properties directly linked to individuals who have substantially impacted their field, community, or history. The individual must have achieved significance due to their accomplishments, contributions, or actions, which influenced significant historical, cultural, or social developments. [32] To qualify under Criterion B, the property must be demonstrably associated with the person in a way that directly reflects their significance.

The Knitting Mills campus qualifies for consideration on the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion B due to its association with Ferdinand Thun and Henry Janssen, pioneers of industrialization. The development of the Reading Knitting Machine had widespread impacts, revolutionizing the level of nylon production and increasing production and longevity. In addition to their industrial contributions, their industries spurred the suburban development of Wyomissing, creating easy access for employees to work and live while incentivizing more industries to move their operations to the area.

Criterion C of the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) applies to properties that embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or construction method, represent the work of a master, or possess high artistic values. This criterion recognizes significant properties because of their architectural, engineering, or artistic qualities. [33] To qualify under Criterion C, a property must demonstrate outstanding design, craftsmanship, or construction techniques characteristic of a specific architectural style, type, or period. It can also apply to structures that

[32] National Park Service, How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, 1990; revised 1991, 1995, 1997), https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/upload/NRB-15_web508.pdf.
[33] Ibid

represent a significant example of a particular construction method or material, or to works that are notable for their design by a recognized master architect or builder.

Lastly, the Knitting Mills campus qualifies for consideration on the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion C due to its example of industrial architecture, representing the construction of factory buildings while showing the traditional uniformity of company town architecture. The factory buildings, 105 and 202, represent the use of bricks for fireproofing and large windows to increase sunlight, enabling workers to view their machinery more efficiently, thus increasing productivity. [34] Additionally, building 105 is significant for placing the dyeing floor on top, ensuring ample overhead space for light and ventilation. This innovative design decision aligns with the desire for high production and quality products.

The remaining buildings supported the mill's operations, providing dining, parking, medical care, and communication needs. These buildings are uniform, utilizing the same brick color and pattern, with similar window sizes and symmetry. This assured their prominence as a significant feature, standing out amidst the surrounding housing and factories.[35] At publication, the exteriors had been minimally modified, and restoration had been completed to ensure structural stability and longevity. The minimal modifications include new signage and replacement windows, but the scale, organization, and distinguishing materials are intact.

[34] Joey Strawn, "The Roots of Industrial Chic," Industrial Marketer, May 22, 2015, https://industrialmarketer.com/the-roots-of-industrial-chic/
[35] Social Welfare History Project, "Company Towns: 1880s to 1935," https://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/organizations/labor/company-towns-1890s-to-1935/.

Criterion A and C, considering the Knitting Mill site's connection to significant events and architecture, strongly support its nomination to the National Register of Historic Places. The mill's features include placing the dyeing floor on the top of Building 105. The site's design and intentionality complement the surrounding Wyomissing Borough, proving a thoughtful approach to textile production and community development. The partner's steadfast goal to create a living and working environment has had lasting impacts on the built environment of Pennsylvania, offering citizens the opportunity to live, play, and learn surrounded by history and nature.

5. 1 Potential Implications and Outcomes of DOE Approval

If the Determination of Eligibility (DOE) for the Knitting Mills campus is approved, it would confirm that the property meets the criteria for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, even if it is not formally listed. This recognition alone can have an impact by validating the site's historical and architectural significance at the federal level. It can raise awareness among stakeholders, local officials, developers, and the community, emphasizing the importance of preserving the site's industrial heritage and its role in the economic development of Wyomissing and the broader region.

One significant implication of DOE approval is its effect on future planning and redevelopment involving federal funds or permits. Under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, any federally assisted projects that might affect the property would be subject to review by the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO). This process ensures that potential impacts to the site's historic character are considered and encourages design solutions compatible with its historic fabric. As such, DOE status can influence how alterations, demolitions, or new construction within the campus are approached.

While DOE status does not automatically make the site eligible for financial incentives, it is often a precursor to formal listing, which would create opportunities to explore historic preservation tax credits and potential grants. This could support efforts to further adaptively reuse the mill buildings to retain their character while accommodating new uses, whether for commercial, institutional, or mixed-use purposes. The recognition also makes the site attractive to preservation-minded developers or institutions investing in sustainable and historically focused redevelopment.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Determining the Knitting Mill campus as eligible for the National Register of Historic Places as a historic, industrial district facilitates several opportunities to engage with local stakeholders, the public, and officials across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. With its ties to industrial history, technological innovation, and connection to regional labor, the preservation of this site is integral to serve as a tool for public history. This tool will encourage conversations involving industrial evolution, labor equity, and regional identity. By elevating its unique character and community ties, the campus becomes a place for interpreting broader themes in American history while solidifying them in a location that holds meaning for residents and descendants.

Following this investigation, all documentation will be formally submitted to the State of Pennsylvania Historic Preservation Office to determine eligibility consideration. If the nomination moves forward, it will mark a significant achievement in preserving a historically and architecturally substantial site and ensuring its stories continue to shape and inspire future generations. In addition to protecting an important historical and architectural site, this nomination broadens the scope of properties the National Register of Historic Places acknowledges by highlighting its evolved physical form. It recognizes adaptive reuse as a vital means of fostering development and historic preservation.

This project highlights the success of adaptive reuse in preserving historic integrity while accommodating contemporary needs. It demonstrates the importance of recognizing and valuing such structures within preservation efforts. By maintaining architectural character and promoting sustainable growth, these projects serve as vital examples for future preservation initiatives.

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