

State of California — The Resources Agency
 DEPARTMENT OF PARKS AND RECREATION
PRIMARY RECORD

Primary # _____
 HRI # _____
 Trinomial _____
 NRHP Status Code 6Z

Other Listings _____
 Review Code _____ Reviewer _____ Date _____

Page 1 of 11 *Resource Name or #: (Assigned by recorder) 1395 Van Ness Avenue

- P1. Historic name of building (if any):** James F. Waters DeSoto and Plymouth showroom
P2. Location: *a: County San Francisco Not for Publication Unrestricted
 *b. USGS 7.5' Quad _____ Date _____ T _____; R _____; _____ ¼ of _____ ¼ of Sec _____; _____ B.M.
 c. Address 1395 Van Ness Avenue City San Francisco Zip 94109
 d. UTM: Zone _____; _____ mE/ _____ mN *e. Assessor's parcel #: Block 671, lot 1
***P3a. Description:** (Describe resource and its major elements. Include design, materials, condition, alterations, size, setting, and boundaries)

This six-story reinforced concrete building fills its 120' by 220' lot. It is bounded on the east by Van Ness Avenue, on the north by Bush Street, and on the south by Fern Street. This building has been altered over time, with the first story presenting an early, perhaps largely original, appearance; stories two through five presenting an appearance dating mainly to ca. 1947; and the top story dating to some time during the 1950s-1970s. The top story addition reduced the building's two elevator towers, once prominent in appearance, to mere stubs. In composition the facades are divided by piers into six bays along Van Ness and eleven bays along Bush and Fern, except in the top story, where bands of glass stretch across the facades. The piers are covered with a coating of stucco. In the first story, these piers are scored, tooled, and decorated with slightly recessed outlines of quoins; while they are smooth above this level. Spandrels in the second through fifth stories are covered with corrugated sheet metal. Storefront windows along Van Ness and in the four adjacent bays along both Bush and Fern streets have original or early steel frames. Windows in stories two through five have original three-over-three steel sash, and windows in the top story have aluminum sash. Entrances on Van Ness have decorative iron frames. Two vehicle entrances can be found in the Bush street façade. Several signs appear to date to the 1940s or earlier and were probably moved from another building in 1963.

*P3b Resource Attributes: HP6 – commercial building; HP8 – industrial building

*P4. Resources Present: Building Structure Object Site District Element of District Other



P5b. Description of Photo:
 (View, date, accession #)
View looking southwest
June 2009
***P6. Date Constructed/Age and Source:** Historic
 Prehistoric Both
1916, ca. 1948; building permit, photos
***P7. Owner and Address:**
BROOKS MARIE K REVOC TRUST
1395 VAN NESS AVE
SAN FRANCISCO CA 94109
***P8. Recorded by:** (Name, affiliation, and address)
William Kostura
P. O. Box 60211
Palo Alto, CA 94306
***P9. Date Recorded:** _____
January 2010
***P10. Survey Type:** (Describe)
intensive
P11. Report Citation*: (Cite survey report.) William Kostura.

Van Ness Auto Row Support Structures. San Francisco Department of City Planning, 2010.

- *Attachments: NONE Location Map Sketch Map Continuation Sheet Building, Structure and Object Record
 Archaeological Record District Record Linear Feature Record Milling Station Record Rock Art Record
 Artifact Record Photograph Record Other (List)

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Top photo: Main entrance, Van Ness Avenue. Bottom photo: Entrance on Bush Street. Their decorative treatments indicate they may date to the original construction of 1916.



Top photo: Double-hung wood sash window typical of those in the second through fifth stories. The sash dates to 1916, while the corrugated sheet metal spandrels must date to 1947-1948.

Bottom photo: Fern Street side of the building.



Two signs on the Van Ness Avenue side. One or both of these, as well as other signs on the Bush Street side, may have been transferred to this building from 1595 Van Ness when Ellis Brooks moved from there to here in 1963. The “OK” logo was used by Chevrolet dealers for their used car sales rooms.

BUILDING, STRUCTURE, AND OBJECT RECORD

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*NRHP Status Code 6Z

*Resource Name or # (Assigned by recorder) 1395 Van Ness Avenue

B1. Historic Name: James F. Waters DeSoto and Plymouth showroom

B2. Common Name: Ellis Brooks Chevrolet

B3. Original Use: auto showroom B4. Present Use: used cars showroom

*B5. Architectural Style: International

*B6. Construction History: (Construction date, alterations, and date of alterations)

Built in 1916. Façade modernized in 1947 or 1948. Top story added at an unknown date (during 1954-1970s).

*B7. Moved? No Yes Unknown Date: _____ Original Location: _____

*B8. Related Features:
none

B9a. Architect: Mills, Rhine, Bellman, and Nordhoff (1916); unknown (1947-8) b. Builder: Leonard Construction Co. (1916)

*B10. Significance: Theme automobile industry Area San Francisco

Period of Significance n/a Property Type auto showroom Applicable Criteria n/a

(Discuss importance in terms of historical or architectural context as defined by theme, period, and geographic scope. Also address integrity.)

History -- Introduction

This building was built in 1916 for the Willys-Overland Company as one in their chain of auto showrooms across the United States. Through the 94-year history of this building it has been an auto showroom for seven dealerships. Its style was substantially altered in ca. 1947, and a new story was added some time during the 1950s-1970s.

History – Willys-Overland Company

The Willys-Overland Company of Toledo, Ohio was founded in 1908 when John North Willys purchased the Overland automobile company. Further acquisitions followed over the next five years, resulting in models known as the Willys-Knight (which used an engine developed by Charles Knight) and the Stearns-Knight (after Willys' acquisition of the F. B. Stearns Company). These were popular brands, and according to Wikipedia, Willys-Overland became the nation's second largest auto manufacturer in the 1910s, behind only Ford.
(See Continuation Sheet, page 6.)

B11. Additional Resource Attributes: (List attributes and codes) _____

***B12. References:**

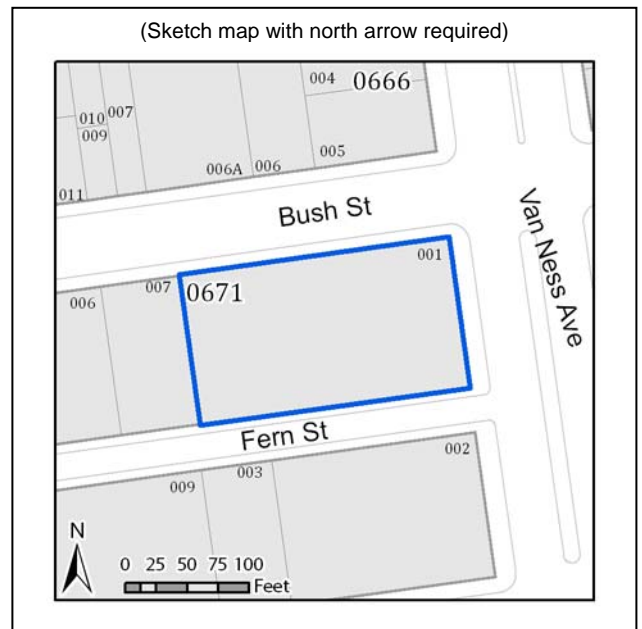
- Building permit #68656 (April 7, 1916)
- Crocker-Langley and Polk's city directory, and PT&T reverse directory listings for occupants of this building, 1917-1964
- PT&T Yellow Pages, August 1947 and May 1948 (ads for Waters)
- George Volney Rhines, "Sales and Service Buildings for an Automobile Manufacturer," *American Architect*, March 20, 1918.
- Andrew Ross, "Ellis Brooks Chevrolet dumping entire GM line." *SF Chronicle*, November 21, 2008.

B13. Remarks:

*B14. Evaluator: William Kostura

Date of Evaluation: January 2010

(This space reserved for official comments.)



CONTINUATION SHEET

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History – Willys-Overland Company (continued)

This popularity led Willys-Overland to develop a chain of automobile showrooms – including this building, 1395 Van Ness – across the United States during 1916-1918. This was an unusual and daring move on the company’s part. Throughout the history of the automobile in the United States, the vast majority of auto brands have been sold through local dealerships. Willys was one of the few automakers that purchased real estate and built their own auto showrooms.

All of Willys’ showrooms were designed by a single architectural firm: Mills, Rhines, Bellman, and Nordhoff, of Toledo, Ohio. One of the architects, George Volney Rhines, described the design considerations of these buildings (in “Sales and Service Buildings for an Automobile Manufacturer,” *American Architect*, March 20, 1918). For a location, the automaker sought “a street carrying heavy pleasure car traffic and far enough from the congested business district of the city to avoid excessive cost in land.” This describes Van Ness Avenue, San Francisco’s Auto Row, perfectly.

Although there would by necessity be different requirements in different cities, standardization of design was employed to the greatest extent possible. Most buildings would combine several departments. A showroom for new autos was of course a given. There would also have to be a used car department, for many buyers wished to trade their old car in when buying a new one. Spaces for service, painting, and auto storage were also needed. Usually all of these departments were placed into a single building to save on land costs. In California, where weather was mild, the roof was used for storage and for tuning up motors. Toward this end the elevator was extended to the roof, which was paved.

In structure, all of the multi-story buildings were built of reinforced concrete with exterior walls of brick. The facades were clothed in rough-texture brick that was either red or brown in color. Gray limestone was also used on the exterior of some or all buildings – at 1395 Van Ness, this material may have been used for the pedestrian entrance facing Bush Street (extant, but now painted). Windows had steel sash and frames, which at 1395 Van Ness survive to the present. The showrooms were simply finished in order not to distract shoppers from the automobiles (this being an opposite philosophy from that held by Don Lee and Earle C. Anthony when they built their Cadillac and Packard showrooms in the 1920s). Ceilings had molded but otherwise plain cornices and flat beams. Floors were paved in six-inch white tiles with black joints, this being the only material that did not absorb dripping oil from autos.

A few of Willys-Overland’s buildings of 1916-1918 were illustrated in *American Architect*. Those for Kansas City and St. Louis were fully as large as their building for San Francisco, if not larger. These buildings were clearly an immense investment for the company. Willys’ success, however, led to further acquisitions and over-extension, and so during the recession of 1920 the company had to be restructured to solve its debt problems. During the 1920s and 1930s it was a much less important company. Production of the Stearns-Knight and Willys-Knight ended in 1929 and 1933, respectively. Today Willys is best-remembered for its role of producing the Jeep for the U. S. government during World War II (along with Ford and a third company). Willys continued to produce the Jeep afterward, and so did the auto makers that bought the Willys company: Kaiser Motors in 1953, and AMC in 1970.

Undoubtedly because of its financial problems, Willys-Overland remained at 1395 Van Ness for a relatively short period of time, through 1923; it then moved to 1412-1420 Van Ness (extant).

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History – Subsequent auto dealers at 1395 Van Ness Avenue

A number of important brands were sold in this building by some of San Francisco's most prominent auto dealers from the 1920s through 2008. The list of dealers follows:

1922-1927: Earle C. Anthony, Packard dealer

While Willys-Overland still remained in this building, they leased the southern portion of it, addressed 1335 Van Ness, to Earle C. Anthony, San Francisco's distributor of Packard, the luxury automobile. At first, in 1922, he only used this building as his accessories and service center while his main showroom was at 1400 Van Ness; but the next year this building became his showroom as well. It remained so until 1927, when he built his own grand showroom designed by Bernard Maybeck at 901 Van Ness.

1924-1931: Chester N. Weaver, Studebaker

Weaver was San Francisco's long-time (since 1914) distributor of the Studebaker automobile. During 1924-1927 he sold this car from the portion of this building not occupied by Earle C. Anthony; afterward he probably occupied the entire building.

1932: Jeff R. Townsend, Studebaker and Pierce-Arrow

Townsend was briefly the successor to Chester Weaver's business. He sold both Studebaker and the luxury automobile Pierce-Arrow (which by this time was largely owned by Studebaker) here.

1933-1934: Arthur R. Lindberg, Studebaker and Pierce-Arrow

Lindberg continued to sell Studebakers and Pierce-Arrows here. This was the last year that Pierce-Arrow was sold in San Francisco.

1935-1963: James F. Waters, Desoto and Plymouth; alterations to the building

James F. Waters sold DeSoto and Plymouth automobiles in San Francisco for 30 years – and for the last 25 of those years in this building. He began his career as a salesman for Chester Weaver, and then became a used car dealer. He began selling new DeSotos and Plymouths at 550 Van Ness Avenue (extant) in 1929 or 1930, almost immediately after those brands were founded. He was almost certainly the first San Francisco dealer in these brands. He remained at 550 Van Ness for five years, and then moved his showroom to this vastly larger building in the middle of the Depression.

Both Plymouth and DeSoto were products of Chrysler Corporation and were introduced in 1928. Plymouth was a low-priced car, while DeSoto was a mid-priced car. The DeSoto entry in Wikipedia states that shortly after Chrysler introduced DeSoto, it acquired another mid-priced brand, Dodge Brothers; and “had the transaction been completed sooner, DeSoto never would have been introduced.” Nevertheless, DeSoto (named after the explorer) usually sold well through 1957, but then sales slumped, and the brand was discontinued in 1961.

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History – Subsequent auto dealers at 1395 Van Ness Avenue (continued)

Plymouth's design could be traced back to that of the Maxwell auto, which had been acquired by Chrysler several years earlier. Plymouth became known for its "durability, affordability, and engineering," according to Wikipedia, and was one of the nation's top-selling cars during the 1930s-1950s. It was sold by all three of Chrysler's divisions – Chrysler, DeSoto, and Dodge – and helped the corporation survive the Depression.

In 1947 or 1948 Waters radically changed the façade design of this building. (No building permit could be found for this alteration. It can be dated because Waters included photos of this building in his yellow pages ads. The old appearance is shown in the August 1947 yellow pages, and the new one in May 1948.) The original building design had been rather fortress-like, and dark, even forbidding. It was only slightly softened by its decorative details, which included shields or cartouches at the second floor level and at the top of the piers, outlines of quoins in the first story, a tapering of the piers in the parapet area, banding in the elevator towers, and prism glass in the first story windows.

Waters stripped of the shields from the façade, covered the piers with stucco, eliminated the tapering of the piers in the parapet area, and stuccoed and squared off the elevator towers. It is uncertain whether the corrugated sheet metal now covering the spandrels was put in place then, but this was very likely the case. The prism glass in the first story and the double-hung steel sash above remained in place. Although the surgery had not been radical, the effect was quite different. The building had practically an International style aesthetic after these changes.

Waters remained in this building for sixteen years afterward. He sold Plymouth and DeSoto cars here through 1959, then switched to selling Buick and Opel, both General Motors brands. When he moved his showroom to Van Ness and Market in 1963, he continued to sell Buicks.

1963-present: Ellis Brooks Chevrolet; the sixth floor addition to this building

James F. Waters' place in this building was taken by Ellis and Marie Brooks. Ellis Brooks had sold used cars at various locations in San Francisco from 1939 to 1945. He then began to sell new cars at 1595 Van Ness: Kaiser and Frazer in 1947-1948, and Hudson in 1949-1950. In 1955 he began to sell Chevrolet autos, and this was the brand he stayed with for the rest of his life. After eighteen years at 1595 Van Ness, he took Chevrolet with him when he moved two blocks south, to 1395 Van Ness. From the appearance of some of the old signs at the latter building, it seems likely that Brooks removed them and took them with him also.

He became ill in 1963, the same year he moved into this building. His widow Marie Brooks took over the business then, and is still president. Their grandson John Brooks is the general manager.

The business at 1395 Van Ness was always known as "Ellis Brooks Chevrolet" until December 2008, when Brooks stopped carrying that brand and switched to selling only used cars. Until then, other General Motors cars – Cadillac, Buick, and Pontiac – were also sold in this showroom.

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History – Subsequent auto dealers at 1395 Van Ness Avenue (continued)

Ellis Brooks Chevrolet was one of the five important Chevrolet dealerships in San Francisco's history. The list includes:

- 1920-1933: Robert A. Smith, principally at 399 Golden Gate (demolished)
- 1933-1970s: Ernest Ingold (and his successor George Olsen), principally at 999 Van Ness (extant)
- 1933-1954: Don Gilmore, principally at 550-590 Van Ness (extant)
- 1935-1960s: Les Vogel, principally at SW corner Market and South Van Ness (altered)
- 1955-2008: Ellis and Marie Brooks, first at 1595 Van Ness, then at 1395 Van Ness (both extant)

At an unknown time, possibly during the 1950s, but more likely during the 1960s or 1970s, a sixth floor was added to this building. With its long bands of windows it disrupts the rhythm of the bays in the lower five floors, and it also reduces the apparent height of the elevator towers above the top story. The first story prism glass – still present in 1954 – has also been lost since then.

Integrity

Despite the survival of the windows in stories two through five, and of some details in the first story, this building has lost integrity for the period through 1947 due to its extensive alterations.

Considering the integrity of this building for the period 1948 through the early 1960s, this building has since lost its prism glass and, more seriously, has gained a new sixth story. The building retains integrity of location, materials, workmanship, and setting, and has diminished integrity of design, feeling, and association.

Evaluation

This is one of more than 100 buildings along the Van Ness Avenue corridor that have a history as automobile support structures, and that are being evaluated for possible historic significance according to the criteria of the California Register of Historical Resources. With a few exceptions, these buildings were auto showrooms, public garages, auto repair shops, auto parts and supplies stores, and auto painting shops. The time period that is being studied is from the initial years of the automobile industry in San Francisco through 1964. Among the factors that have been considered when evaluating a building are its date of construction, its longevity of auto-related use, the importance of its occupants in local auto industry history, integrity, and architectural quality. These factors, and how they apply to evaluations of buildings, are discussed in a cover report, *Van Ness Auto Row Support Structures, 1908-1964*.

The building has lost integrity for the period through 1947, and thus has no potential for historic significance through that period. This evaluation, then, will consider only the history of this building since 1948. For that period, this is a late example of an automobile showroom. With 16 years of such use in its history from 1948 through 1964 (the end year of the period being studied in this report), it has fair longevity in this use.

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Evaluation (continued)

The most important occupant during these years was James F. Waters, who was probably the city's only prominent DeSoto and Plymouth dealer. Because the period being considered is so late compared to other auto showrooms in the study area, and because the sixth floor addition has rather strongly reduced the building's integrity, this building does not appear to be eligible for the California Register of Historical Resources under criteria 1 or 2, for its association with Waters. A similar argument holds for Ellis and Marie Brooks, whose showroom at 1595 Van Ness has better integrity than this building does.

Architecturally, this building is far from a pure example of the International style, and the top story addition (from some time during the 1950s-1970s) disrupts the rhythm of the bays in the stories below. Overall, the building's design lacks distinction. It thus does not appear to be eligible for the California Register under Criterion 3.



Photo from 1921-1923. Earle C. Anthony's Packard showroom occupies the bays to the south, and Willys Overland's showroom is in the bays to the right. San Francisco History Center, Main Library. Photo AAD-4662.



Photo dated November 1935, the same year James F. Waters occupied this building. The autos parked in front are DeSotos, destined to become part of Yellow Cab's fleet of 300 autos. San Francisco History Center, Main Library. Photo AAD-4674.



This photo shows how the building looked after the alteration of 1947 or 1948, by James F. Waters. From the San Francisco city directory of 1954.