

Building Plaque Application

Name SHOE FACTORY LOFTS
Building Address 618-644 CONGDON AVE, ELGIN, IL 60120
Building Name SHOE FACTORY LOFTS
(for public/commercial structures)
Current Owner SHOE FACTORY HOMEOWNERS ASSOC.
Street 618-644 CONGDON AVE Daytime Phone _____
City ELGIN State IL Zip 60120

Original Owner	<u>LUDLOW & COMPANY</u>
Date of Construction	<u>1891</u>
Architect (if known)	<u>W. W. ABELL</u>
Builder (if known)	_____

Check if attached:

Statement Of Value

Please review the criteria on page 5. The Elgin Heritage Commission uses these criteria to review your application and award a plaque. Attach an explanation of the historical and architectural value of the building. Attach photocopies of relevant materials such as copies of Sanborn maps, original property deeds and City Directory listings. Applications without these requirements will not be considered by the Elgin Heritage Commission.

Building Alterations

Describe any alterations to the exterior of the building and include dates. Attach description to the application.

Photograph

Include a recent photograph in which the building is clearly visible. Additional photographs depicting a close up and details of decorative features are helpful.

Stipulations

If the building is not awarded a plaque, the application fee of \$15.00 will be refunded.

This application and submitted materials shall be retained by the City of Elgin as a part of the permanent record of the building.

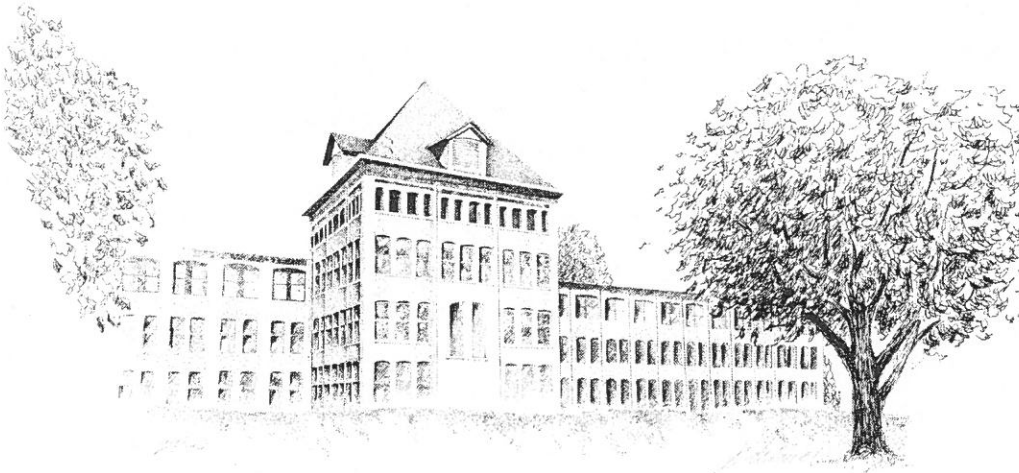
The Elgin Heritage Commission has the authority to edit and publish the information submitted in the application. This does not prohibit others from using the information.

When awarded, the plaque will remain the property of the City and cannot be altered or removed from the building. It is the City's responsibility to replace the plaque if and when the situation warrants it.

In addition to agreeing to the above stipulations, the undersigned attests that the information provided is, to the best of his/her knowledge, accurate.

Owner's Signature Valerie Ornal SECRETARY
SHOE FACTORY HOMEOWNERS ASSOC. Date 7-29-02

Signed _____ Date _____



S H O E F A C T O R Y L O F T S

COMPLETED IN 1891, THIS MASSIVE, CLASSIC STYLE BUILDING ATTRACTED THE GEORGE W. LUDLOW CO. A MAJOR SHOE PRODUCER TO MOVE FROM CHICAGO TO ELGIN. OVER THE YEARS IT HAS HOUSED MANY COMPANIES, BUT WAS REBUILT IN 1999 BY BRUCE LORD, ASHWOOD CORP. INTO 27 RESIDENTIAL LOFTS. DESIGNATED A LOCAL HISTORIC LANDMARK IN AUGUST, 2002.





July 29, 2002

Elgin Heritage Commission
City of Elgin
150 Dexter Court
Elgin, IL 60120

To Members of the Heritage Commission,

I am writing on behalf of the Shoe Factory Homeowner's Association to request a historic plaque for our building located at 616-644 Congdon Avenue, Elgin. The development contains 14 townhomes and 13 condominiums in what was once the Ludlow Shoe Factory. The property has been renovated in a manner to retain certain elements from the factory. Preserved historic elements include the former safe now converted into a walk in closet, original distressed maple flooring has been refinished, 1 foot square cedar beams with cobbler's nails intact, iron support beams, and 5' thermopane windows throughout that are in the original design.

The Shoe Factory Homes were featured in the 2000 Historic Elgin House Tour and a page from the brochure that contains the history of our building is included. I have also enclosed additional historical background on this building from the Courier News Internet site.

The residents of the Shoe Factory Lofts continue to make improvements to our homes which include adding extensive landscaping and developing landmark type signs to add further beauty and pride to our neighborhood. We take pride in giving new life and value to one of Elgin's surviving turn of the century factories.



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Another step in life of old Elgin shoe factory

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The exposed brick, big timbers and unusual spaces of old factory buildings are considered desirable features for the so-called urban pioneers who are looking for a different style of living. But the large and most distinguished projects of that type have been almost exclusive to Chicago, particularly trendy North Side areas.

In Elgin, those examples have been limited to a handful of conversions of downtown spaces big enough for one person or small family.

Owners of the former Ludlow Shoe Factory at Illinois 25 and Congdon Avenue have carved up an industrial past to create 27 spaces for townhomes and condos in a \$3.5 million project.

The conversion is an ironic completion in the historical life of the shoe factory, which was built as an incentive by a developer to lure people into Elgin to buy his homes.

German-born William Grote came to the United States in 1866 at the age of 16. Landing in New York, he went immediately to Bartlett, where he was employed as a farm hand. He was joined by his parents and together they farmed for another five years.

In 1871, he opened a mercantile business in Elgin, a successful venture he operated for 11 years. During that time, he began forays into the real estate business, eventually linking with a silent partner.

Grote began buying extensive tracts of property, dividing it into city lots. He moved into the commercial end of the business, building a hotel and other businesses downtown. He is credited with bringing several large businesses to Elgin, including D.C. Cook Publishing Co., Illinois Watch Case Co., Cutter & Crosette shirt factory, Elgin Silver Plate Co. and Elgin Sewing Machine & Bicycle Co.

The shoe factory was among a collection of northeast-side industries that attracted the workers who bought the houses that Grote built. During the late 1800s, George Ludlow had been operating his shoe factory in the very heart of Chicago. He became concerned, according to accounts of the day, for the sluggish pace of employees who did piece work.

Forced to get up at 4:30 a.m. to make it on time from the outskirts of Chicago, the workers often strolled in late and ate a "wholly indigestible" lunch at noon. By then, Ludlow reasoned, their minds were not on their jobs.

"How in the world can we expect to get good service from hands who are compelled to live in this manner?" Ludlow asked. "We pay for the best and we get the worst and we are going to stop the leakage."

The answer, in an early foreshadowing of a later city exodus, was to move the company. Many sites were offered, but the leading candidate was Elgin, a city of "prosperous working people" where "everybody is busy and only idleness is scorned."

As Ludlow carried on about Elgin's "purest country air" and streetcar running by the door, he failed to mention that it was a developer's incentive that sealed

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the deal.

Grote and his Elgin Improvement Company "furnished a fine building as a bonus," which was constructed in 1891. In return for building the shoe factory, Ludlow was given shares in a land pool worth \$40,000.

Designed by W.W. Abell, a local wunderkind, the main shoe factory building measured 44 feet by 304 feet. Half of the structure's \$32,000 price tag was spent on masonry work.

The shoe factory, with the Grote-inspired shirt factory and watch case company, comprised a growing hive of industry on Elgin's north end.

In 1891, 500 new homes were constructed to accommodate the influx of workers for those and other thriving industries. By comparison, 252 new homes have been built in Elgin last year through September.

Congdon Avenue east of Elgin becomes Shoe Factory Road, a reminder of the area's main business.

Ludlow went bankrupt within a few years, and the business eventually passed to Selz-Schwab & Co. of Chicago. Shoes were made again for a time, but the Great Depression put it out of business for good in 1929.

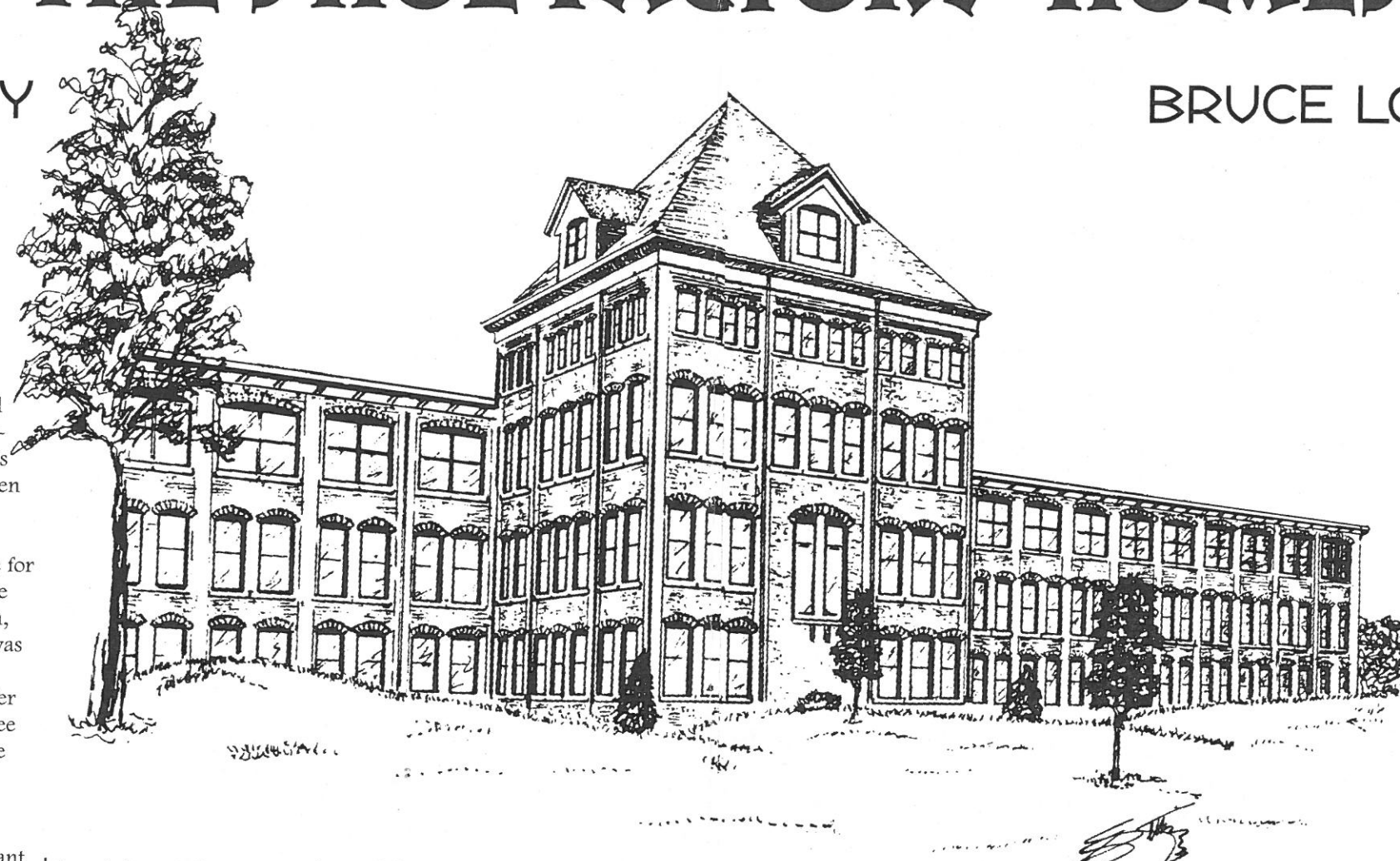
Brody Inc., a coat manufacturer, occupied the building in 1952. That operation switched to retailing in the 1970s and closed for good about 1990.

03/11/01

THE SHOE FACTORY HOMES

Built for
LUDLOW & COMPANY
in 1891,
as an Elgin shoe factory

Rebuilt by
BRUCE LORD, ASHWOOD CORP.
in 1999
as 27 luxury residential lofts



In the "olden days" it might not have been so impressive to tell your friends and relatives that you lived in a shoe factory. In 21st century Elgin, however, it is all the rage. Of course, it's not a shoe factory anymore, but it continues to bear that name, as this 109-year-old shoe manufacturing plant has been transformed into the Shoe Factory Homes.

When it was built in 1891, the building was full of promise for a couple of guys named George. George Ludlow and George Keep were moving their shoe business from Chicago to Elgin, with the help of a somewhat ambitious real estate deal. It was agreed that the Elgin Improvement Company, a real estate operation run by William Grote and A.B. Church, would offer these partners the land at the corner of Congdon and Dundee Avenues, provided that their shoe factory employ 350 people for five consecutive years.

That first August, there were 370 employees there, who worked 10-hour days, six days a week. For two years, the plant was quite busy, turning out approximately 900 pairs of shoes each day. However, the shoe business was not able to survive the financial "Panic of 1893," and went under. The most permanent reminder of this firm's brief stay are the nearby Keep and Ludlow Avenues. Hartwell Street was named for Mrs. Ludlow -- it was her family name before her marriage to George.

The factory property defaulted to Grote and Church, and they ran the plant briefly themselves before another Chicago shoe manufacturer took over in 1897. The Selz-Schwab Company made shoes there for 32 years. They were in full swing, turning out 2000 pairs of women's shoes daily, when the Palm Sunday tornado struck in 1920. The building was empty at the time, luckily, but the roof was lifted completely off. Hundreds of shoes were swept skyward, and some were seen floating down the river more than half a mile away! The factory was able to repair and recover, and Selz-Schwab remained there for another 9 years.

When they closed in 1929, 300 people were left unemployed. The B.G. Garments Co., a manufacturer of women's dresses, suits and coats, occupied the 2nd floor in 1930 and later moved to the third floor. The employees, who usually num-

bered about 150, were members of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union Local 90. Popularly known as the *Barney Google*, after a comic strip character, this company was a valued addition to the local economy during the Depression years that followed. When the owner, Barney Gisnet, had income tax problems, Elgin's mayor, fearing the firm could be shut down, personally pleaded with authorities on Gisnet's behalf.

Over the next several decades, many businesses came and went, including a miniature golf course called Tiny Tim, Libby Neon Products, Welsley Chairs Corp., Elgin Metalformers, and an Illinois State Highway Department sign shop. In 1952, Brody, Inc. came in to replace the Barney Google garment company, and they remained in the building as a small retail outlet until 1990.

It was in the 1990s that Bruce Lord of Ashwood Corporation saw new potential in this building. With residential loft space becoming increasingly popular in Chicago, Ashwood took on the task of creating townhomes and condos out of this Elgin space that once whirred with manufacturing frenzy.

Most shoes found in the building now are all in closets and belong to the folks who quickly bought up these lofty suites to

call their own. In each wing are 3-story townhomes, long and spacious with towering ceilings. Plenty of natural light pours in from the 5-foot tall windows, which are new, but obviously of the original design, with curved brick arches outlining them. In the center tower are condo units, some with two levels. The whole look of the corner has changed since the building became residential - an abandoned gas station is no longer a plague upon the streetscape, and the factory's smokestack and power plant were removed from the rear, to make way for parking and improved green space.

Valerie and Tom O'Neal are old-house lovers who discovered Elgin and wanted to stay, but felt guilty that their jobs were keeping them from having enough time to devote to restoration projects in their 19th-century Moseley Street home. They looked at the Shoe Factory models and joked about how perfect it would be to live there instead. A year later, learning that there were just five units left, the O'Neals decided to make their move. They opted for "old townhome" living, admitting it is the perfect set-up to fulfill both their old-house and lifestyle needs. They have found a friendliness with their fellow Shoe Factory dwellers which makes their building a neighborhood unto itself. Valerie sits on the Townhouse Association Board, and is very involved in changes and decisions taking place in the building and the surrounding neighborhood.

One of the charming features of these townhomes is the remaining character of the Shoe Factory itself. In the townhome units, cobblers nails can be found in exposed beams. Ceilings and floors were sanded and left as is. The interior is a functional mix of old and new - 21st century comfort and affordability, with priceless antiquity blended in.

Kim Mache is a condo owner in the building. The tower section at the center is where all the condos were designed. There are no exposed cobblers nails in her unit, but she does have exposed brick on the exterior walls, and round iron support beams reaching through her ceiling and floor -- now painted white, and resembling antique columns.

She came from Schaumburg, and scrambled for a unit here as well, getting in as one of the last buyers. Her 2 floors have a studio style downstairs, which was once part of the loading or storage area for the factory. Upstairs are two bedrooms and a bath. The master bedroom is part of the Shoe Factory office suite, which at one time had a steep set of stairs leading up to the front door from Congdon Avenue. Evidence of this double door is seen in the very corner of the master bedroom -- the other half being incorporated into the apartment nextdoor.

One of the more intriguing features of the condo space is the walk-in closet, which is the Shoe Factory's original vault. The brick entry wall is nearly 18 inches thick, and inside you can see the rough plaster walls and the vaulted ceiling. Of course, the only valuables in there now are of the sentimental sort -- favorite shoes, favorite jeans, etc.

With so much of Elgin's architectural past already destroyed, it is all the more inspiring to see a part of it saved, and done in such an appropriate and tasteful manner. The residents of the Shoe Factory Homes are all proud and enthused to be showcasing their building. Many of them came from outside Elgin to settle on this perfect corner -- close to downtown Elgin and its rail line, close to the Northwest Tollway, and within a picturesque historic neighborhood with much to offer. We owe a debt of gratitude to Bruce Lord for dreaming his dream for this building, just as Ludlow and Keep once did, and making it come true. ❖

Note: Special credit goes to Mike Alft for much of the text and research on the history of this property.