

# A Walk Through the Showers Brothers Furniture Factory

Historic Tour Guide No. 11



## City of Bloomington, Indiana



The site of Bloomington, Indiana’s City Hall was once home to the Showers Brothers Furniture Factory. At its peak in the 1920s, the Showers Brothers Company produced more than 700,000 pieces of furniture a year, enough to fill 16 train-car loads a day. Producing more than half of all the furniture made in the United States, the company declared itself “the world’s largest producer of bedroom and dining room furniture.” Showers Company expanded the market for its products by selling through the Sears Roebuck and Montgomery Ward catalogues. This was a very innovative marketing strategy for the day, allowing them much broader contact with potential customers than selling through local furniture stores.

Charles C. Showers, a cabinetmaker and part-time preacher, founded the Company in 1856 and later turned it over to his sons. The Company remained in the family for three generations. Showers Company was a major employer in Bloomington, with as many as 1,200 workers. It accounted for a quarter of the City’s tax revenues. The company was so important to the local economy that the City paid almost half the cost of a new factory on Morton Street after a fire destroyed its production facility on Grant Street. By 1910, the new plant occupied a seven-acre complex at its location on Morton Street.

As a family-run business, Showers was known for its liberal employee benefits and was exceptional in its hiring of women and African-Americans. The Showers brothers established a bank “solely for the benefit of its employees...” to both encourage and enable them to own their own homes. The brothers also sponsored a number of company events including professional performances in the auditorium (601 N. Morton), the Showers Brothers orchestra, basketball and baseball teams, and boxing leagues. The brothers provided employees with a company grocery store and a subsidized cafeteria. They were so highly regarded in the community that, when the eldest brother, James, died in 1913, business in Bloomington virtually stopped so that, “...all classes of people could pay their last respects to this pioneer, industrial leader and banker who, during his life, gave such outstanding service to the community.”

Business declined during the Great Depression and then resurged briefly around World War II. In the 1940s, the furniture industry began moving to the south to take advantage of cheap labor. At the same time, the trucking industry emerged and became the preferred means for transporting goods. When the Showers Company did not make the necessary investments to switch from train to truck distribution of its products, the company could no longer compete. After a long and illustrious history, the Showers Company shut down in 1955. The Stork Line Furniture of Chicago bought the business and ran it for a few years. In 1959, the Morton Street factory was sold to Indiana University to be used for storage until 1994. Two fires in 1966 destroyed a large part of the remaining Showers complex including the north section of the existing facility.

Plant No. 1 was designed by Chicago engineer Charles H. Ballew and constructed in 1910 around the existing factory. It is the largest remaining historic industrial building in Bloomington, Indiana. The building is one of many industrial and commercial structures built near the original location of the Louisville, New Albany and Salem Railroad which ran north and south through the core of Bloomington. The red brick masonry walls, heavy timber frame construction, structural wood floor decking, double-leaf doors, wood frame and steel sash windows and sawtooth roof were functionally designed to accommodate the company’s manufacturing process. The building had to be substantial enough to support both heavy machinery and inventory. Windows and the sawtooth roof with clerestories provided the buildings only light until being electrified in 1896. The double leaf doors facilitated movement of goods. Today, Plant No. 1 is one of the few remaining buildings in the Showers complex which, at the height of production, covered 15 acres.

Historic industrial buildings usually possess solid construction, open floor plans and an abundance of natural light, features that make them adaptable to a variety of new and interesting uses. In 1994-1996 the City of Bloomington, CFC, Inc, a local developer and Indiana University joined forces to revitalize the industrial building. The City of Bloomington used the space for its new City Hall; CFC, Inc, for commercial offices; and Indiana University for a Research Park. The building was separated into three different sections for the three owners and then subdivided for office use. The historic rehabilitation was guided by the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation and maintained the building’s historic integrity. As one observer wrote, “...The factory represents a model of adaptive reuse and urban planning that seeks to reclaim and revitalize Bloomington’s downtown industrial sector and preserve the city’s historic identity and legacy.” The collaborative effort to revitalize the Showers building breathed new life into the city’s west side and sparked other rehabilitation projects in the area.

Showers Plaza, once the home of an industrial giant, is again bustling with activity and is a source of civic pride prompting the restoration project to be called “The Miracle on Morton Street.”



Shop Notes Advertisement for the “Christmas Savings Club”



Showers Brothers Company was one of the first furniture factories in the United States to employ women workers. Here Elsie (Kinser ) Bowlen (3rd from the left) stands among her coworkers dressed for her shift. She was approximately 17 years old when this picture was taken.

## A 1914 Showers Bros. Veneer Mill Scene



A 1914 Veneer Mill Scene

### In Appreciation:

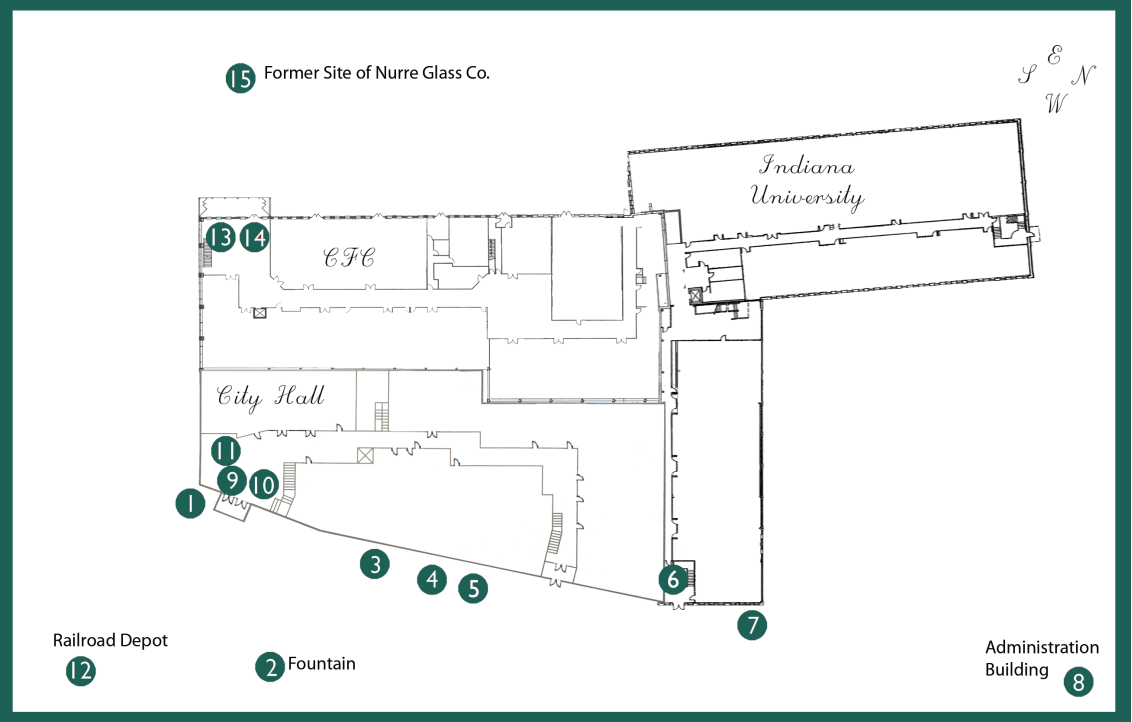
Financial support for this publication was provided by the City of Bloomington Housing and Neighborhood Development Department.

Researched and written by Lauren Iannucci, with assistance provided by Nancy Hiestand, Diana Hoffman, Eryn Brennan, Liz Knapp, Lisa Simmons. Additional archival information was gathered at: The Indiana Room, Monroe County Public Library and The Monroe County History Center. Photographs courtesy of Indiana University William H. Mathers Museum. China cabinet from the collection of Audra Page.

The buildings and features shown here are representative and are not intended to be an exhaustive list of historic resources in the district.

Please respect the privacy of the buildings’ occupants by viewing all listed features quietly and from an appropriate distance.

## Showers Brothers Furniture Factory





## Tour Sites

### 1. Sawtooth Roof

The sawtooth roofline of the Showers Brothers factory is its most striking feature. The building was one of the first in the world with a sawtooth roof and skylights. This unusual roof was more than an architectural design feature. The transom windows, which stretch the entire length of the building, provided an abundance of natural light and ventilation. The windows improved working conditions and helped increase productivity and profits. The roof is wood framed and supported by heavy timber beams. The transom windows were repaired in a rehabilitation project that began in 1994 and ended approximately two years and \$28 million later.



### 2. Limestone Sculpture

Commissioned by Dallas artist Brad Goldberg, this sculpture, resembling a giant chalice, is made of 80 tons of limestone and towers 12 feet tall. It was installed in the spring of 1995. It is also a working fountain spilling water from its top, down the sides into a 9-foot basin, out into a stream and back again.



### 3. Windows

Double-hung wood frame six-over-six windows with limestone lintels and sills were installed in a repeating pattern along the exterior walls and provide the only natural light in the first floor of the building.



### 4. Doors

The utilitarian double-leaf doors and the perimeter concrete loading docks facilitated movement of goods. The two original sections of the building had double-leaf wood doors with 1” x 4” diagonal wood siding. The 1923 additions had double-leaf wood panel doors with a six-light glass panel above and diagonal wood narrow tongue-and-groove siding in the lower panel. During the 1994-1996 rehabilitation project, some of the double-leaf doors were repaired and reinstalled while others were replaced with steel service doors or full-light glass and aluminum doors.



### 5. Canopies

The original design of the corrugated metal canopies cantilevered with cables over entrance doors was replicated in the 1994 rehabilitation project. This attention to historic detail means the exterior of the building remains largely unchanged from the original construction.



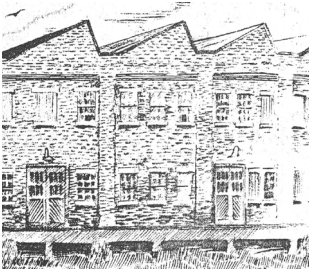
### 6. 1923 Additions

In 1923, the company expanded its product line to include entire suites of furniture for bedrooms and dining rooms, as well as kitchen cabinets, radio cabinets and desks. In the 1923 additions, the original windows to the south and northeast of the building were closed in with brick and the entire building was renovated.



### 7. Loading Dock

A concrete loading dock ran the length of the east façade and along parts of the west side of the building. The loading dock was replaced in the 1994 rehabilitation project with pedestrian sidewalks.



### 8. Administration Building

Constructed in the 1920s, the Showers administration building contained offices for management and an auditorium on the second floor. There the brothers sponsored a number of company events including professional performances in the auditorium. The marble fireplaces and paneled wood interiors testify to the success and sophistication of its owners and growth of the company. The former administration building was purchased by Indiana University in the 1950s and currently houses the Indiana University Press.



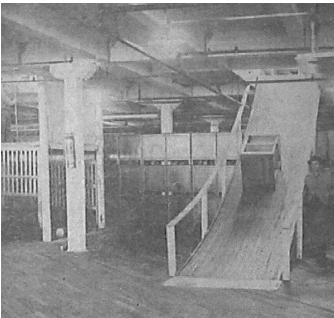
### 9. Construction

The factory was designed and constructed to support heavy machinery and inventory. Heavy timber beams support the floors and roof. Many of these show a unique kind of damage. Workers say that employees struck their sharpened tools in the beams as they left at the end of the day.



### 10. Chutes

Packaged products were sent down a system of curved chutes from the second to the first floor. This simple method, which relied only on gravity, was determined to be far more efficient and economical than elevators. Five hundred pieces of furniture could be sent down a chute in 20 minutes.



### 11. Heating the Factory

The overhead piping located along the low area of the sawtooth roof originally provided heat for the building. This innovative design feature also heated the sawtooth valleys through the tin roofing and prevented snow build-up. This feature was replaced in the 1994-1996 restoration project.



### 12. Railroad Depot

Proximity to railroads was extremely important to 1900s industrial companies. The building is one of many industrial and commercial structures built near the original location of the Louisville, New Albany and Salem Railroad, which runs north and south through the core of Bloomington. At the height of Showers’ success, the railroad, then named the “Monon” shipped 16 train-car loads of furniture a day and accounted for 60% of the United States furniture production.



### 13. Showers Seal

In 1910, after a successful era of production, distribution and expansion, the Showers Brothers adopted the phrase “From Tree to the Trade” as the company’s motto. This concept is depicted on the company seal. A replica if the original company seal is on the floor of the CFC lobby.



### 14. Shop Notes

Showers published a company newsletter called “Shop Notes” from 1917 to 1927. The bimonthly magazine informed employees of news and upcoming events as well as advertising company benefits. For example, employees learned that, “Mr. Martin, inspector at the Nurre Mirror Plant Co., purchased the pony won by Clyde Cassner at the Catholic Bazaar at Bedford last week.” Employees were also aware that, “Lyman Fulk is on a business trip to Chicago,” and “Reamo Morelli had his foot mashed last week by a case of glass falling on it. He is still off duty.”

## Shop Notes

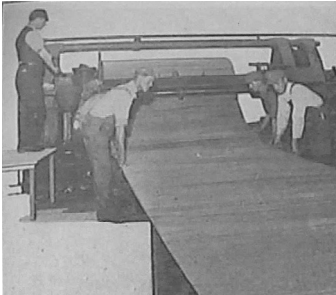
### 15. Nurre Glass Company

The Nurre Glass Company manufactured plate glass mirrors for Showers furniture beginning in 1912. The factory was located west of Plant No. 1. The two companies merged briefly between 1928 and 1930. Under new administration in 1928, the company embarked on a period of expansion, purchase and expenditure that some believe ultimately caused its downfall. But other conditions such as the cost of lumber which became more scarce in the Midwest and the less expensive labor in the South were part of national trends in that cause changes in furniture making.

## Social History

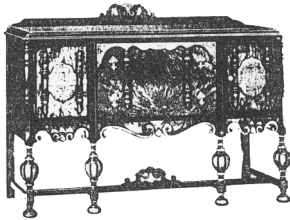
### Wood Lamination

Showers Brothers coined the term “lamination.” Wood lamination has since become a staple in modern cabinet construction, both reducing cost and strengthening surface treatments. Surface finishes on the moderately priced furniture produced by the company were dramatically improved by the design and grain quality achieved with laminates and rotary oak veneer, which was another furniture construction method pioneered by the Showers Brothers Company.



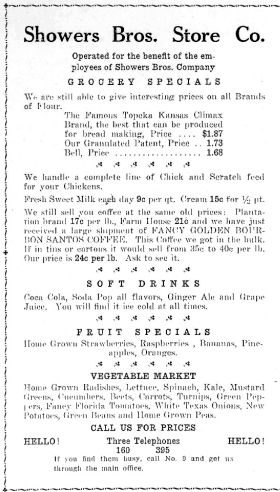
### Furniture

In the 1920s, Showers produced more than half of all furniture made in the United States. The company declared itself “the world’s largest producer of bedroom and dining room furniture.” A complete “General Price List” of all furniture published in 1937 is on file in the Monroe County Historical Society Genealogy Library. The Pemberton style is featured here.



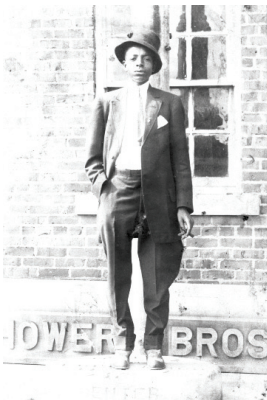
### Grocery Store

One of many social welfare programs, a grocery store was operated for the benefit of Showers employees. The June 2, 1917, issue of Shop Notes advertised “Fresh Sweet Milk each day, 9 cents a quart, Plantation Brand (coffee) 17 cents per pound, Coca Cola, all flavors of soda pop, Ginger Ale, Grape Juice, home grown fruits and vegetables.”



### Center of Population

In 1910, the center of population for the United States was located in Bloomington, Indiana, and a stone was placed at the entrance of the Showers Factory. The stone was moved to the courthouse lawn when the center of population shifted further west. Today, the Center of Population stone is located on the south side of the Monroe County Courthouse.



### Women & Showers

As a family run business, Showers was known for its liberal hiring practices and employee benefits. It was exceptional in its hiring of women and African-Americans. It took pride in being one of the first furniture factories in the United States to employ women. Women entered the workforce to fill in for men who were serving in the military during World War I. An issue of Shop Notes published during the war reported that, “45 women employed in the finishing, cabinet and machine rooms [were] ‘doing their bit’ in a highly satisfactory manner.” An article in Shop Notes urged men “to understand that so far as her work is concerned, she is placed on the same level with the men.” However, in 1921, the foreman and managers of the company “...unanimously voted to revert to the prewar system of employing only men in the factory” in order to alleviate unemployment among men with families.



### African Americans & Showers

The company began employing African Americans in 1868. An African-American community of Showers employees grew up on the west side of Bloomington assisted by company programs to increase home ownership. Showers was known for generous benefits, which included worker’s compensation, home financing and cultural events.

