

SOUTHEAST MISSOURI STATE UNIVERSITY

AT THE FOREFRONT OF STOREFRONTS:
A LOOK AT THE LEGACY OF MESKER BROTHERS IRON WORKS
AND GEORGE L. MESKER & COMPANY

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Introduction

The latter half of the nineteenth century was an era of expansion and progress for entrepreneurs across America. Advances such as the invention of the incandescent light bulb and the elevator, as well as increasing experimentation with building materials and mechanical processes supported a shift from the use of trained craftsmen to that of unskilled laborers in the industrial centers of the nation. During this time, many Americans decided to look westward as new communities began to spring up across the Midwest and beyond. Entrepreneurs across the country needed an inexpensive and speedy way to build shops, banks, and public buildings in these new communities. Two manufacturing giants rose to the challenge—George L. Mesker & Co. of Evansville, Indiana, and Mesker Brothers Iron Works, of St. Louis, Missouri. Both companies offered cast-iron and stamped galvanized steel facades and other architectural elements through trade catalogs. Shipping goods directly to customers in all 50 states via the ever-expanding rail system, these two companies quickly emerged at the forefront of storefront innovation.

Buildings featuring the products of these companies, or Meskers, as they are commonly known, are embedded in the fabric of downtowns and commercial districts across the country. Their history, identifying features, and significance in the development of the American commercial built environment remain unknown to many. The Meskers that remain and the surviving trade catalogs of the two companies provide a glimpse into the architectural style and trends of the industrial age of progress before and at the turn of the twentieth century. The works and legacy of Mesker Brothers Iron Works and George L. Mesker & Co. are more than just ornate and colorful storefronts. They epitomize industrialization and stand as testament to the innovation and progress sought by Frank, Ben, and George Mesker.

History of the Mesker Companies

To understand the legacy of the Mesker family, we must first examine the history of the brothers and their companies. Sons of John Bernard Mesker (1823-1899), a German immigrant who settled in Cincinnati, Ohio, the Mesker brothers were exposed to metal work at an early age. As a “tinner,” their father was trained to work with small sheets of iron dipped in tin, called tinplate.¹ Mindful of changes in the tinplate market in Ohio and Pennsylvania, John Mesker shifted his concentration to the tinware and iron stove businesses. This diversified his interests and allowed him to survive the crash of the price of tinplate in 1875.² Working for several companies and all the while enhancing his skill set, in 1844 he began traveling the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, providing tinwork repair services from a flatboat he built. Mesker and Busse, a stove manufacturer, was co-founded by John Mesker in 1847, and in 1850 he opened his first store in Evansville, Indiana, selling stoves and later galvanized iron work. J. B. Mesker & Son, as his company came to be called, prospered until the turn of the twentieth century and offered an excellent environment for his sons to learn his trade in addition to providing the resources to pay for their education at private and business schools.³

Though Bernard “Ben” Mesker (1851-1936) worked in partnership with his father to form a chair company, Buehner, Mesker & Company, he was not destined to remain in Evansville. Restless, Ben decided to journey to Colorado in search of silver. He sold his interest in J. B. Mesker & Son and headed West. On his way, Ben stopped to visit his brother Frank in St. Louis in 1879, and never made it to Colorado. Frank Mesker (1859-1952), working as an estimator and

¹ Bryjka, Darius. “Sibling Rivalry Good for Illinois Architecture: The Meskers’ Sheet-Metal Businesses.” *Historic Illinois*, Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, Division of Preservation Services, 28 (April 2006): 4.

² Margot Gayle, David W. Look, and John G. Waite. *Metals in America’s Historic Buildings: Uses and Preservation Treatments*. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1992), 12.

³ Mesker Brothers Iron Works Records, 1879-1953. Collection sl331 on microfilm. University of Missouri-St. Louis: Western Historical Manuscripts Collection. Finding Aid. (also available online).

bookkeeper for the sheet metal firm of Huzzell and Cozzens, persuaded Ben to join forces with him to form Mesker and Brother (later known as Mesker Brothers Iron Works). Despite early commissions including the Crow Memorial Building designed by Peabody & Stearns, Mesker and Brother remained obscure until they received a contract for metal work for the St. Louis Exposition and Music Hall building in 1882.⁴ This grand hall was designed by J. B. Legg, the same architect who later designed Academic Hall at Southeast Missouri State University. According to the Landmarks Association of St. Louis, Inc., the Exposition and Music Hall, “measuring 502 x 332 [feet] and built at a cost \$750,000 . . . was heralded as one of largest and grandest in the nation.”⁵ The contract was more than likely awarded to Mesker Brothers Iron Works because Frank was a former employee of J. B. Legg.⁶ (Figure 1)



Figure 1: Sketch of St. Louis Exposition and Music Hall, designed by J. B. Legg. Courtesy of Landmarks Association of St. Louis, Inc., <http://www.landmarks-stl.org>.

During the early years of Mesker and Brother, Frank Mesker made several trips to New York, to investigate a possible move for the company. In 1884 during one of these trips, he happened upon a sheet metal company in Washington, D.C. that was closing its doors. Fifteen

⁴ Mesker Brothers Collection, WHMC-St. Louis. Finding Aid, 1.

⁵ “Jerome Bibb Legg (1838-19??).” Landmarks Association of St. Louis, Inc. http://www.landmarks-stl.org/architects/bio/jerome_bibb_legg_1838_19/ (Accessed March 28, 2009).

⁶ Bryjka, correspondence, April 10, 2009.

hundred catalogs from the company showcasing their products remained and Frank decided to paste a new cover to the front of each and issue them to potential customers, particularly in the West. The designs in these catalogs were very similar to the patterns and products already offered by Mesker and Brother. Response to the first catalog was great, with many requests for storefronts and products from new customers. In the next two years, catalog distribution escalated to 50,000 catalogs in 1886 and then to 500,000 catalogs just one year later in 1887.⁷ These ornate and detailed catalogs serve as records for the company and as a primary source for anyone researching the Mesker companies. They offer insight into the advances in technology within Mesker Brothers Iron Works over time, particularly during the height of their success from the mid 1880s to 1910.

Following this period of success, Frank and Ben shifted to more lucrative fields, as the Italianate and classical styles of their storefronts waned in popularity. During World War I, Mesker and Brother worked for the Allied and U.S. forces producing bread ovens and ranges. Following his brother's death in 1936, Frank Mesker became president and oversaw production during World War II. Airplane landing mats, ammunition lockers, oil and water tanks for submarines, and fragmentation bombs were just a few of the products provided by the company during the war. Following Frank's death in 1952, his sons and grandsons took over the company and kept it through the 1960s when it passed out of Mesker hands. Still under the Mesker name, the company moved from St. Louis, Missouri to Huntsville, Alabama in 1988, where it remains today. The company claims to be "the oldest hollow metal door company in America," manufacturing hollow core metal doors that are distributed across the country.⁸

⁷ Ibid, 1.

⁸ Bryjka, 6.

Mesker Door History, <http://www.oldestmetaldoor.com/>. (Accessed March 28, 2009).

While Frank and Ben were making a name for themselves in St. Louis, their brother George was also entering the storefront business. He began working with another brother, John Henry Mesker (1855-1898), as a partner at his father's firm, J.B. Mesker & Son. Important early contracts under the direction of George include the iron, zinc, and tin work for the Cloud State Bank in McLeansboro, Illinois. This French Second Empire bank was finished in 1881 and features ornate architectural elements and a "bull's eye" tower.⁹ (Figure 2)



Figure 2: The Cloud State Bank in McLeansboro, Illinois, completed in 1881 by J.B. Mesker & Son. Note the ornate "bull's eye" tower, complete with wrought iron ornamentation. Photo credit: Flickr, accessed through www.gotmesker.com (Accessed March 3, 2009).

Much like his brothers, George Mesker (1856-1936) felt the need to embark on his own and in 1885 he started his own business, George L. Mesker & Company. To limit competition between the three Mesker companies now located in Evansville—J.B. Mesker & Son; Buehner, Mesker & Company; and George L. Mesker & Company—each focused on a particular product. These included iron stoves, chairs, and storefronts, with George assuming the role of storefront production. Competition between his company and his brothers in St. Louis continued and drove business, especially when he took a page of their catalog and modeled his own after it.¹⁰ His catalogs tout the company as "The Largest and Most Complete Establishment in the United

⁹ Bryjka, 6.

¹⁰ Bryjka, 7.

States,” although his brothers in St. Louis would have disagreed.¹¹ The brothers remained close personally, despite competitive business interests. (Figure 3) Both companies distributed their products to all of the 48 states of the Union at that time. George also shipped products to Bermuda, while Mesker Brothers Iron Works shipped to Hawaii, Alaska, Cuba, Canada, Mexico, and even India.¹² (Figure 4)



Figure 3: Despite fierce business competition between Mesker Brothers Iron Works and George L. Mesker & Company, the family remained on good terms. In 1903, they gathered for Frank’s wedding. Pictured are: (seated, from left to right) George L. Mesker, Anna Schmidt, Frank Mesker, Pauline Gehner Mesker, Ben Mesker, F. Joseph Schmidt (standing, from left to right) John Mesker, Albert Gehner, August Gehner, and Willamina Gehner (boy in front) Oscar Schmidt, son of Anna and F. Joseph Schmidt. Photo credit: “History Building.” A Photo Gallery. Evansville, Indiana: Evansville Courier & Press. (Accessed September 19, 2008). <http://www.courierpress.com/photos/galleries/2008/feb/25/history-building/>.

¹¹ George L. Mesker & Co. *Architectural Iron Works, Evansville, Indiana*. 1903 edition. Manuscripts and Special Collections, University of Illinois at Springfield. http://collections.carli.illinois.edu/cdm4/document.php?CISOROOT=/uis_msc&CISOPTR=144&CISOSHOW=96 (Assessed March 31, 2009), 1.

¹² Figures compiled using Google Earth file created by Darius Bryjka, Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, www.gotmesker.com.

Figure 4: This table lists the states, both historically and today, where products were shipped from either of the companies. The figures were compiled using a Google Earth file created by Darius Bryjka, for the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, www.gotmesker.com. This research tool allows those interested in Mesker locations to view pin-points in the locations on the map. Many, when clicked on, reveal images of identified Meskers.

Mesker Locations By State:				
	<i>George L. Mesker</i>		<i>Mesker Bros.</i>	
	Historic	Existing	Historic	Existing
Alabama	X	X	X	X
Alaska	X			
Arizona	X	X	X	X
Arkansas	X		X	X
California	X		X	X
Colorado	X		X	X
Connecticut	X			
Delaware	X	X		
Florida	X	X	X	
Georgia	X	X	X	X
Hawaii			X	
Idaho	X		X	X
Illinois	X	X	X	X
Indiana	X	X	X	X
Iowa	X	X	X	X
Kansas	X	X	X	X
Kentucky	X	X	X	X
Louisiana	X		X	X
Maine	X	X		
Maryland	X		X	X
Massachusetts	X			
Michigan	X	X	X	X
Minnesota	X	X	X	X
Mississippi	X	X	X	
Missouri	X	X	X	X
Montana	X	X	X	X
Nebraska	X	X	X	X
Nevada	X		X	X
New Hampshire	X			
New Jersey	X		X	
New Mexico	X		X	X
New York	X		X	X
North Carolina	X	X	X	X
North Dakota	X		X	
Ohio	X	X	X	
Oklahoma	X		X	X
Oregon	X	X	X	X
Pennsylvania	X		X	X
Rhode Island	X		X	X
South Carolina	X	X	X	X

Mesker Locations By State:				
	<i>George L. Mesker</i>		<i>Mesker Bros.</i>	
	Historic	Existing	Historic	Existing
South Dakota	X	X	X	X
Tennessee	X		X	
Texas	X		X	X
Utah	X	X	X	X
Vermont	X	X		
Virginia	X		X	X
Washington	X	X	X	X
West Virginia	X		X	X
Wisconsin	X	X	X	X
Wyoming	X	X	X	X
Locations Other than in U.S.:				
	<i>George L. Mesker</i>		<i>Mesker Bros.</i>	
	Historic	Existing	Historic	Existing
Bermuda	X			
Cuba			X	
Fort MacLeod, AB, Canada			X	X
Lunenburg, Canada			X	X
Mexico			X	

George L. Mesker & Co. continued to produce storefronts into the 1910s and 1920s, far beyond that of his brothers in St. Louis, perhaps, because he no longer had to compete against them. According to Darius Bryjka, coordinator of the Got Mesker? effort for the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, “From 1908 to 1913 George L. Mesker & Co. sold almost as many fronts as during the previous twenty-three years of operation.”¹³ To keep up with building trends, in the 1920s the company began to sell structural steel products as well as storefronts, though they varied in style from earlier designs. George Mesker left Evansville in 1916 to retire in Florida, never to return, but remained head of the company until his death in 1936. During World War II, George Mesker’s company worked on governmental contracts as well. In poor financial standing, George L. Mesker & Co. was sold in 1974 to the Fabsteel Company. In 1981, the Evansville foundry closed, bringing an end to ninety-six years of business.¹⁴

¹³ Bryjka, 7

¹⁴ Ibid, 7.

Identifying Features

There are several key characteristics that distinguish Meskers from other metal storefront facades and an understanding of these identifiable characteristics allows recognition of both George L. Mesker & Company and Mesker Brothers Iron Works products. These characteristics include cast-iron nameplates, stamped cast-iron columns across the ground level, upper story columns, cornice-bracket ornaments, window hoods, and decorative sheet metal panels.¹⁵ Although not easily identifiable, the Mesker companies also created cast-iron railings, fences, doors, and many other products, including jail cells and steel rafters.¹⁶

Comprised of a traditional three-part design with storefront, an upper floor, and a cornice, commercial buildings of the era commonly exhibited recessed entryways.¹⁷ Both Mesker companies extensively used the recessed entrance typical of the time when creating the window and entrance surrounds to accompany complete storefronts. This setback not only invited potential customers into a shop, it also provided more valuable window space for the showcase of goods. For a diagram identifying various features of a storefront as well as the three parts, refer to Figures 5 and 6.

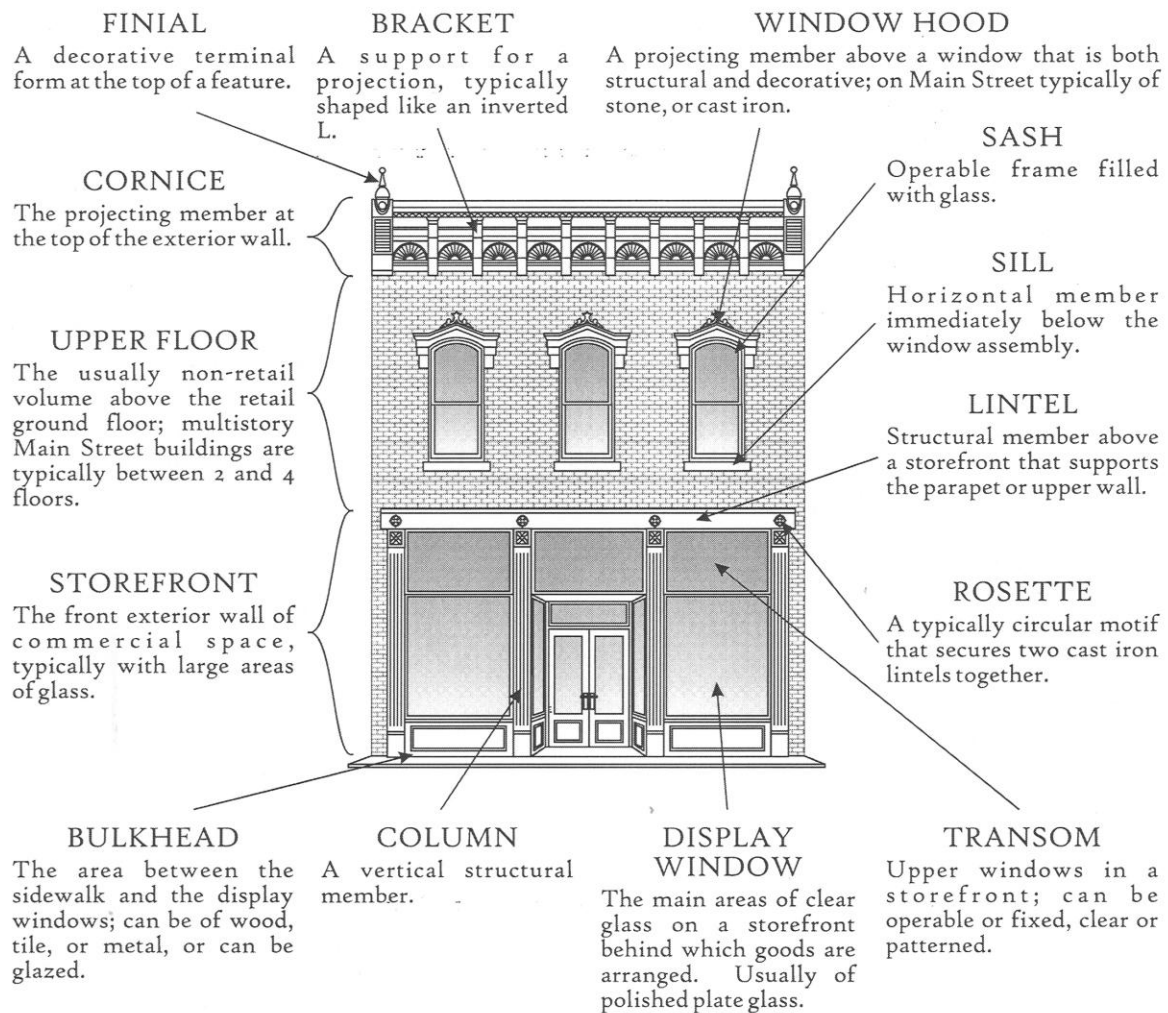
¹⁵ Bryjka, Darius. "Got Mesker: Identification Guide to Sheet-Metal Facades and Building Components Manufactured by Mesker Brothers Iron Works & George L. Mesker & Company." Illinois Historic Preservation Agency. <http://www.gotmesker.com> (accessed March 25, 2009).

¹⁶ Bryjka, Identification guide.

¹⁷ Anatomy of a Main Street Building. Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, http://www.illinoishistory.gov/mainstreet/images/bldg_anatomy.pdf (Accessed April 1, 2009).

Figure 5: This diagram not only shows the parts of a storefront but also provides definitions for the various details of a commercial façade. Handout from Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, http://www.illinoishistory.gov/mainstreet/images/bldg_anatomy.pdf (Accessed April 1, 2009)

ANATOMY OF A MAIN STREET BUILDING



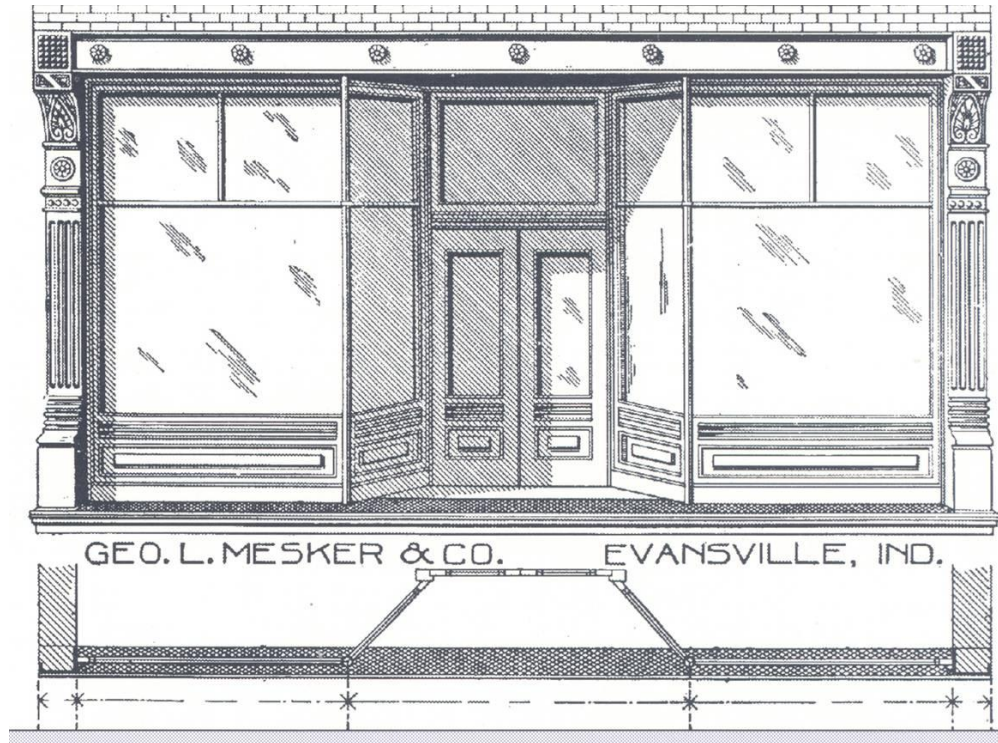


Figure 6: As seen in a 1904 catalog from a Geo. L. Mesker & Co., the Mesker companies offered wooden storefront windows featuring the recessed layout, typical at the turn of the 20th century. The bulkhead, the area below the windows, as well as the display windows and doors could be purchased to from either company, in addition to metal storefront elements. (Image from undated Geo. L. Mesker & Co. catalog)

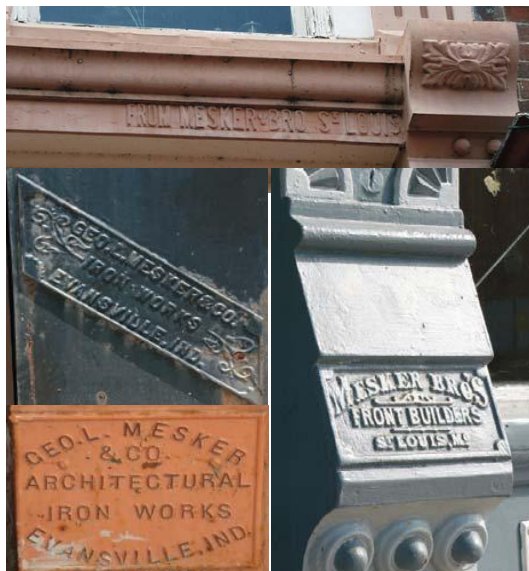


Figure 7: Nameplates like these help to easily identify a Mesker storefront. Images courtesy of the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency.

Cast-iron nameplates allow for easy identification, although these are often missing. Sometimes rusted or coated with multiple layers of paint, these plates are sometimes difficult to decipher. Located on the columns on either side of the front entrance or along the cornice line above the porch or awning and windows, these plates easily label the work of either company, verifying their identity.

(See Figure 7)

Another character-defining feature of a Mesker is the use of cast iron or stamped galvanized steel columns in the storefront. Typically located along the outer edges of the storefront windows and often on either side of the doorway, these cast columns came in various patterns and designs. Mesker Brothers Iron Works began using stamped metal columns early on in their production, as they were lighter and easier to ship without damage. Frank held the patent on the process for creating these



Figure 8: Both Mesker Brothers Iron Works (on left) and George L. Mesker & Co. incorporated columns into their storefront designs.

stamped columns, which allowed Mesker Brothers to have the upper hand in competition with their brother George. George claimed his cast columns were stronger and that he preferred them, when in actuality he could not legally use the technology of his brothers.



Figure 9: The morning glory motif of George L. Mesker and the fleur-de-lis motif of Mesker Bros. Photos credit: Illinois Historic Preservation Agency.

George L. Mesker & Co.'s distinctive cornice design motifs include the morning glory and sunflower, while Mesker Bros. Iron Works preferred the *fleur-de-lis*. Since many foundries in the St. Louis area used the *fleur-de-lis* motif to reflect French heritage, this is not a sure sign of a Mesker façade. One such St. Louis foundry that used the *fleur-de-lis* in their cast iron columns was Christopher and Simpson. If one is not aware of the other defining characteristics of Mesker facades, this may lead to inaccurate identification.

Implementing similar elements, the execution of the design by either company is different. Both offer a nod to the French Heritage of Missouri and St. Louis.

(Figure 10)



Figure 10: The fleur-de-lis motif used by Christopher and Simpson (on left) [on High St. in Jackson, Cape Girardeau County, Mo.] and Mesker Bros. Iron Works (on right). Photo on left taken March 10, 2009 and photo on right courtesy of the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency.



Sheet metal patterns from each of the companies varied in design, although both Mesker companies offered sheets stamped to look like rock-faced stone and brick. George L. Mesker pressed sheets often feature intricate and fluid designs with vines and repeating motifs. The stylized dolphin motif was a popular pattern of stamped metal panels offered by Mesker Brothers Iron Works.¹⁸ These panels can be found on several storefronts in Missouri and Illinois, including the Mississippi Mud Saloon in Altenburg, Missouri and the Old Village Mercantile in Caledonia, Missouri. (Figures 11 and 12)

Recognition of these characteristics and motifs will aid in the identification of products of both of the Mesker companies. Due to the popularity and large distribution of the products of these companies, there are imitations which can be misleading. Local tradesmen who had seen the catalogs and products of the Meskers often crafted copy cat storefronts that feature Mesker designs and motifs, although they lack a sense of fluidity and symmetry. Perhaps the best tools utilized to identify Meskers are the catalogs of the companies. Often featuring sketches of storefronts installed across the country, these publications



Figure 11: Stylized dolphin pattern sheet panel as seen in the Got Mesker? Identification Guide, Illinois Historic Preservation Agency. www.gotmesker.com.

¹⁸ Bryjka, Identification Guide.

provide visual clues pointing to the featured patterns of a particular year as well as images of various pieces sold individually. Catalogs from both Mesker Brothers Iron Works and George L. Mesker & Co. can be found electronically at www.gotmesker.com, hosted by the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency.

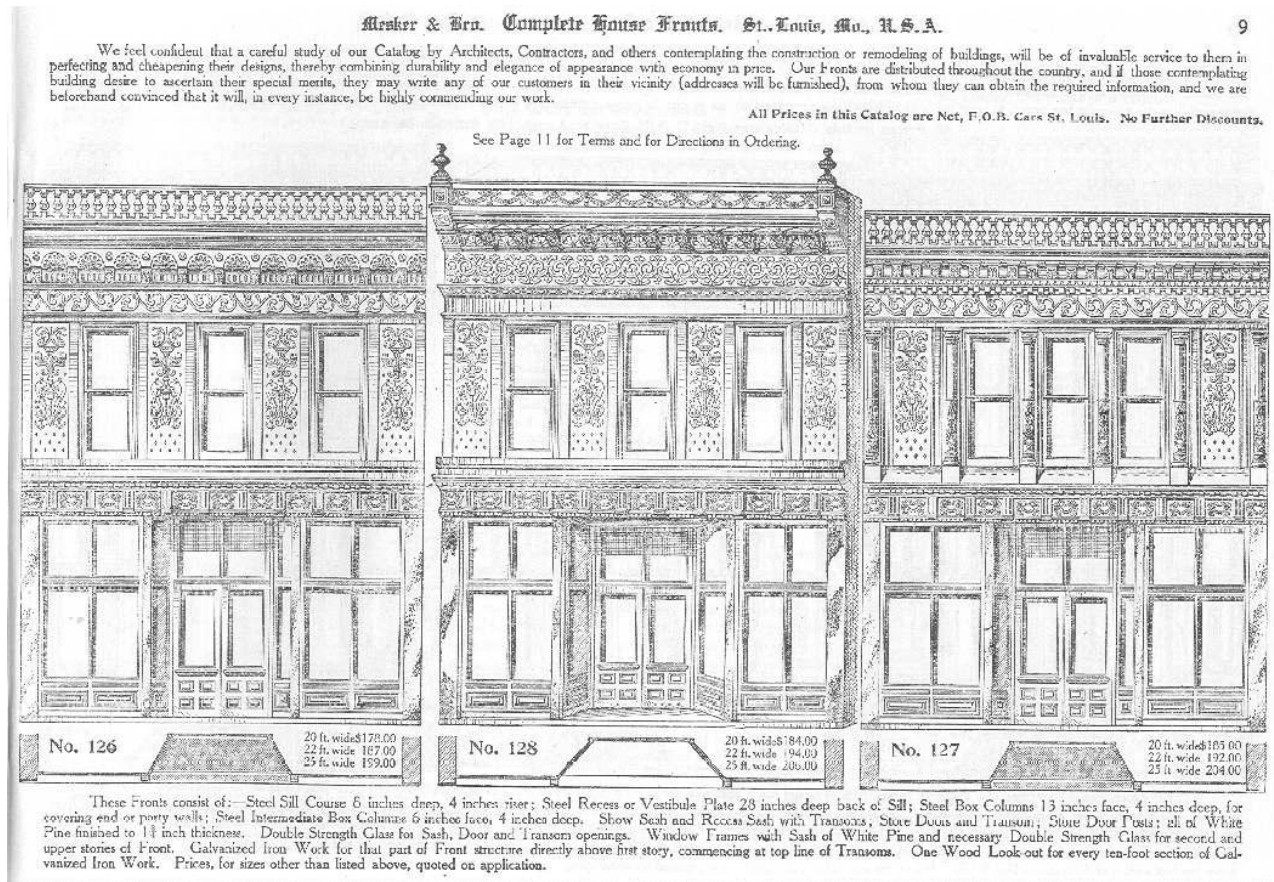


Figure 12: Stylized dolphin panels appear in storefronts featured in a 1904 Mesker Brothers Iron Works Catalog, accessed through www.gotmesker.com, (April 2, 2009)

Significance of the Mesker Companies

The Mesker companies—Mesker Brothers Iron Works and George L. Mesker & Company—offered many advantages and played a vital role in the development of the commercial built environment of America’s downtowns at the turn of the twentieth century. The innovation in manufacturing Mesker products and distribution allowed the two companies to create the typical storefront of the era economically and efficiently, using mass-produced pieces combined with the local building materials to allow middle-class entrepreneurs opportunities to create “cheap, quick, and easy” storefronts.¹⁹ Mesker storefronts are still visible across the country and the examples found in Cape Girardeau County, Missouri, during a recent survey, included in the appendix of this study, showcase the many advantages provided by the use of these industrialized storefronts.

The George L. Mesker & Company 1902 catalog advertised these advantages: “Old frame buildings can be fitted with handsome fronts at a very low price. Don’t use weatherboarding when you can get these handsome fronts so cheap. Send us dimensions of your building and see how cheap we can make a fine front of it—equal in appearance to a fine brick building.”²⁰ Aimed at middle-class business owners and entrepreneurs seeking the opportunity to open a business and small towns springing up throughout the West planning the quick construction of public buildings for their new towns, the Mesker companies used the low cost of their products to their full advantage in advertising in their catalogs.

The Mesker companies used many tools and tactics to ensure their position at the head of the ironwork and stamped metal movement. As new inventions, innovations, and improvements appeared at the turn of the twentieth century, patents began to play an important role in the businesses, particularly with Mesker Brothers Iron Works. According to Darius Bryjka, who is

¹⁹ Simpson, Pamela H. *Cheap, Quick, & Easy: Imitative Architectural Materials, 1870-1930*. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999).

²⁰ Simpson, 50.

currently working on a state-wide Mesker identification project for the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, “Out of the company’s 62 patents, 44 were issued between 1887 and 1892, showing the company’s commitment to becoming the leader in the sheet-metal front business.” These patents for improvements to sheet-metal ceilings, columns, window caps, building fronts, cornice joints, window frames, window sashes, shutter fasteners, and pinnacles show the diversity and extent of the innovation of Frank and Ben Mesker, as well as their assignors. The key patent of Mesker Brothers was for a sheet metal column. While George L. Mesker claimed his cast-iron columns were far superior to steel sheet metal supports, the concealed truth is that his brother Frank held the patent, and therefore, he could not utilize the method of production.²¹ The holding of these patents allowed Mesker Brother Iron Works to quickly zoom to the forefront of sheet metal storefront production.

Another valuable tool utilized by both companies to reach the middle-class businessmen, was to include “testimonials” in their catalogs. These testimonials allowed potential customers to see and read the words of actual customers pleased with the cost and ease of Mesker product installation. An example of a testimonial from a southeast Missouri entrepreneur appears in the 1897 catalog of Mesker Brothers Iron Works which lists “Geo. F. Siemers,” whose business was located in Gordonville, Missouri, in Cape Girardeau County.²² (See Figure 13)

Another advantage to using mass-produced pieces created by the Mesker companies is that these elements allowed individuals to customize their buildings. If a complete storefront design was not what the customer wanted, both Mesker companies allowed customers to select which elements they preferred from different fronts and designs. Once measurements were received for

²¹ George L. Mesker & Co. catalog, (1903). Manuscript and Special Collections, University of Illinois at Springfield.

²² *Mesker Bros. Iron Works*. Fifteenth edition, 1898. Western Historical Manuscripts Collection—St. Louis. Collection sl33: Mesker Brothers Iron Works Records, 1879-1953. (Accessed on microfilm May 25, 2008).

a building, custom facades could be created according to the tastes of the customer.²³ An excellent example of a customized storefront found in Cape Girardeau County is that of the Klostermann Block. Located on South Spanish Street in Cape Girardeau, this façade features elements found in other facades, but the combination of elements is unique. Dating to around 1880, this storefront was most likely a custom-ordered façade from Mesker Brothers Iron Works, in St. Louis.²⁴ (See the survey of Cape Girardeau in the Appendix of this study for an image of the building.)

Figure 13: The George F. Siemers Building in Gordonville, Missouri, was listed as a "testimonial" in the 1898 Mesker Brothers Iron Works Catalog. Catalog image from 1898 catalog on microfilm, Western Historical Manuscripts Collection.

MISSOURI.

A. J. Fuller.....	Bethany
Herman Roleke.....	"
W. C. Rose.....	"
Farmers' Bank	Boonville
W. P. Taylor	Browning
J. B. Drake.....	Bolivar
Utley & Slegle	"
Van Hook & Eden.....	Cassville
S. S. Harris	Cape Girardeau
W. P. Boone.....	Clarksville
Charleston Bank.....	Charleston
F. J. Jecko	"
E. W. Oglevie.....	"
F. W. Walter	Corning
Withers & Moss	Deepwater
Otto Hermann.....	De Soto
W. F. Fowble, El Dorado Springs	
D. H. Athey	Farber
Bell & Scott.....	Granby
A. Helphenstine	Greenfield
Geo. F. Siemers.....	Gordonville
E. B. Weber	Gorin

MISSOURI.—Continued.

Chas. Horn	Jackson
J. R. Hume	Kahoka
A. Lang	"
Geo. Trump	"
D. Trump & Bro	"
J. H. Fritz	Louisiana
J. C. Stauffer.....	Luray
J. W. Roberts	Macon
Wittmer & Smith	Marble Hill
J. H. Punshon	Mound City
E. A. Mansur & Co.,	
	Mountain Grove
J. M. Boggs & Co., New Franklin	
Jas. Robinson.....	Neosho
Kallmeyer & Patton,	
	New Florence
King & Proud.....	Oregon
W. A. Wieneke & Co.....	Olean
Thos. F. Gill.....	Perry
R. C. Waters	Perryville
W. W. Mitchell.....	Shelbyville
R. F. Smith	"
J. J. Heckler	Troy
Geo. B. Kempf	"
J. R. Bratton.....	Vandalia
Geo. S. Brinkerhoff, Warrensburg	
Robt. Mears	"
Fred Seamands.....	"
Lee Mathews.....	"

²³ Darius Bryjka, personal interview with author.

²⁴ Construction date based on information in Tax Assessment Records for Cape Girardeau County.

Because the products of these companies were shipped by rail and installed by local laborers not formally trained in architecture, execution of the final design did not always occur as planned. An excellent example of the lack of knowledge of design on the part of either the building owner or local contractor, or both, is that of a Mesker Brothers storefront located in Caledonia, Missouri. The stylized dolphin motif panels, characteristic of the Mesker Brothers storefront designs for pressed metal panels, were installed upside down. The owner and those installing the front most likely were unaware of the error. A trained student in classical design or architecture would have recognized the torches and stylized dolphins, but a local builder with no formal training would not necessarily recognize these elements. In fact, until the error was pointed out to the owners of the Old Village Mercantile, current occupant of the building, the error had been unnoticed. The owner in fact replied, “I thought those looked like rocket ships,” an accurate description of inverted panels, with the flames of the torches pointing downward.



Figure 14: The stylized dolphin panels on this Mesker Brothers façade were installed upside down. The image on the left exhibits the incorrect installment of the panels, with the pair of dolphins upside-down. The image on the right shows the correct way the panels should appear, with a dolphin on each side and a torch just above the head of each figure. Photo on left was taken by the author, the image on the right is from the Identification Guide, Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, www.gotmesker.com (Accessed March 31, 2009).

An additional advantage building owners found in using Mesker products is that they were easily adaptable, depending on the construction materials available locally. If brick was available locally, buildings were often made of brick and then Mesker elements were added as decoration. (See image of 120-124 N. Main in Cape Girardeau, Mo. included in the Appendix for an example of this technique.) If concrete was readily available, as it gained popularity at the turn of the twentieth century, concrete was used and Mesker products, such as cornices and window hoods were added. (Figure 15) If lumber was the most available building material, Mesker storefronts and stone-faced pressed metal panels were added to a frame building, enveloping it in metal. (See image of 4056 Main St. in Oak Ridge, Mo. included in the Appendix for an example of this technique.)



Figure 15: Located in Iberia, Missouri, this commercial building is constructed using poured concrete and is adorned with George L. Mesker & Co. Cast Iron elements. Photo taken by author.

A superb example of the use of local materials combined with Mesker elements can be found in Sylvan Grove, Kansas. Limestone post-rock, a local material used to construct fence posts and broken into blocks to construct stone buildings, is combined with Mesker elements in two of the facades on that community's Main Street. (Figure 16) The owners of these businesses

were able to use Mesker Brothers cornices and cast-iron columns to personalize their otherwise similar buildings constructed of post-rock. Innovative entrepreneurs in small towns across America were able to utilize the mass-produced and readily available pieces of the Mesker companies to bring class, style, and modernity to small town America.



Figure 16: These one-story commercial buildings in Sylvan Grove, Kansas are constructed of limestone post-rock. Both feature Mesker Brothers Iron Works elements—the building on the left sports a pressed metal cornice (with fleur-de-lis) and the building on the right features cast-iron columns on either side of the traditional storefront. Photos taken by the author, March 16, 2009.

While Mesker elements clearly provided advantages to middle-class entrepreneurs at the turn of the last century, there were critics of stamped sheet metal and other imitative architectural details. An article appearing in the 1885 edition of *Metal Worker*, a trade journal, explains one of the opposing views: “One of the most serious objections to galvanized iron work . . . is that it is simply a servile imitation of other materials . . . [The] boast of those who have manufactured this class of work has often been that it . . . so successfully imitated stone and wood as to be scarcely detected by careful observers.”²⁵ Architects and other formally trained designers and builders did not see the need to imitate materials with a sheet of metal, when the intended look could be achieved using those true materials. A fundamental principle of architecture is truth in materials,

²⁵ Simpson, 50.

and the use of pressed sheet metal to simulate stone or brick directly violates this belief. Another critic of the use of stamped sheet metal ornament offered that while galvanized metal may be a “very valuable material for its uses, and its uses are many there is no need of pressing it into the place of other materials.”²⁶ These elites did not realize the freedom, choice, speed, and economic advantages that pressed and stamped metal ornamentation provided to middle-class builders and entrepreneurs throughout the country, who were not formally trained in architecture and design.

Conclusion:

As the form of the American storefront began to take its place in commercial districts, Mesker Brothers Iron Works and George L. Mesker & Company were at the forefront of storefront design and distribution. The Mesker Brothers utilized the technological advances of the era to provide limitless possibilities in commercial architecture. The use of their various components and facades allowed a quickly-built frame structure to become a beautiful store or public building. By simply encasing a frame structure in pressed metal sheets and components, excess time and expense of middle-class entrepreneurs was spared. If a shop owner wanted to update a brick storefront, Mesker cornices and window hoods could be added very easily, adding style and design to a building. The ornate and classical designs of the Mesker companies brought modernity and style to often remote communities that would have otherwise not been afforded the opportunity to create trendy and formal storefronts and commercial buildings, as the examples found in Cape Girardeau County illustrate.

While many other foundries manufactured such decorative elements, the products that remain of these companies are not as easy to identify. One reason for this challenge is that their catalogs and records are not as complete as those of the Mesker companies. Also the designs of

²⁶ Ibid, 50.

other firms lack the distinctive characteristics that the Mesker companies created—including the fleur-de-lis and morning glory motifs. Additionally, other companies did not ship goods as widely as the Mesker companies. Meskers can be found today in almost every state, as both companies distributed their products to all of the 48 states of the Union at the turn of the twentieth century. George also shipped products to Bermuda, while Mesker Brothers Iron Works shipped to Hawaii, Alaska, Cuba, Canada, Mexico, and even India.²⁷ No matter where one travels throughout the country, chances of encountering a Mesker or a Mesker imitation are high.

The remaining Mesker storefronts found in Cape County as well as throughout the country serve as evidence of the impact of the Mesker brothers' companies on American commercial architecture. As the trend for extensive ornamentation spread across the country, Frank, Ben, and George Mesker were equipped with the tools of industrialized manufacturing to meet the demand. Marketed to middle-class entrepreneurs and assembled by local laborers, Meskers provide a glimpse into the innovations of industrialization in the late nineteenth century. The building techniques used as Americans spread westward and established new communities are visible through an examination of the Meskers that remain. Mesker storefronts are a living legacy.

The story of Frank, Ben, and George Mesker and their journey up the business ladder through two competitive companies is an interesting and traceable one. The adaptability and customization of the mass-produced and patented parts of the Mesker companies as well as their sale through catalogs and their distribution along the rails, epitomizes the spirit of industrialization at the turn of the nineteenth century.

²⁷ Figures compiled using Google Earth file created by Darius Bryjka, Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, www.gotmesker.com.

APPENDIX:
SURVEY OF MESKERS IN CAPE GIRARDEAU COUNTY, MO

The Mesker companies—Mesker Brother Iron Works of St. Louis and George L. Mesker & Company of Evansville—profoundly affected the creation and style of the built environment of rural and small town commercial districts at the end of the nineteenth century throughout America. No where is this more true than in the Midwest, where businessmen and organizations were seeking speedy and inexpensive materials that could instantly create stylish and attractive storefronts. Cape Girardeau County, a network of small, rural communities in southeast Missouri, is no exception. Meskers remain in three communities within the county—Gordonville, Oak Ridge, and Cape Girardeau, standing as evidence of the impact of the Mesker brothers.

The following information was collected during a recent survey of cast iron and sheet metal storefronts. Driving through various communities “Mesker” hunting, during the course of this study, I have surveyed each of the following destinations: Allenville, Arnsberg, Bainbridge, Blomeyer, Brookside, Burfordville, Cape Girardeau, Cliff, Crump, Daisy, Delta, Dutchtown, Egypt Mills, Friedheim, Fruitland, Gordonville, Gravel Hill, Green Cox, Hilderbrand, Jackson, Kurreville, Leemon, Millersville, Nash, Neely’s Landing, New Wells, Oak Ridge, Old Appleton, Oriole, Pocahontas, Rum Branch, Shawneetown, Tilsit, and Whitewater.

Through the following figures and descriptions, the results of this survey are presented. While the identified fronts all were created by Mesker Brothers Iron Works, that is not to say that there were not storefronts or cornices supplied to residents of Cape Girardeau County from George L. Mesker. George Mesker could have supplied storefronts that have since been removed or have been demolished in the last 100 years or so. The nearby counties of Bollinger, to the west, Perry, to the north, and Scott, to the south, feature elements of both George L. Mesker & Company and

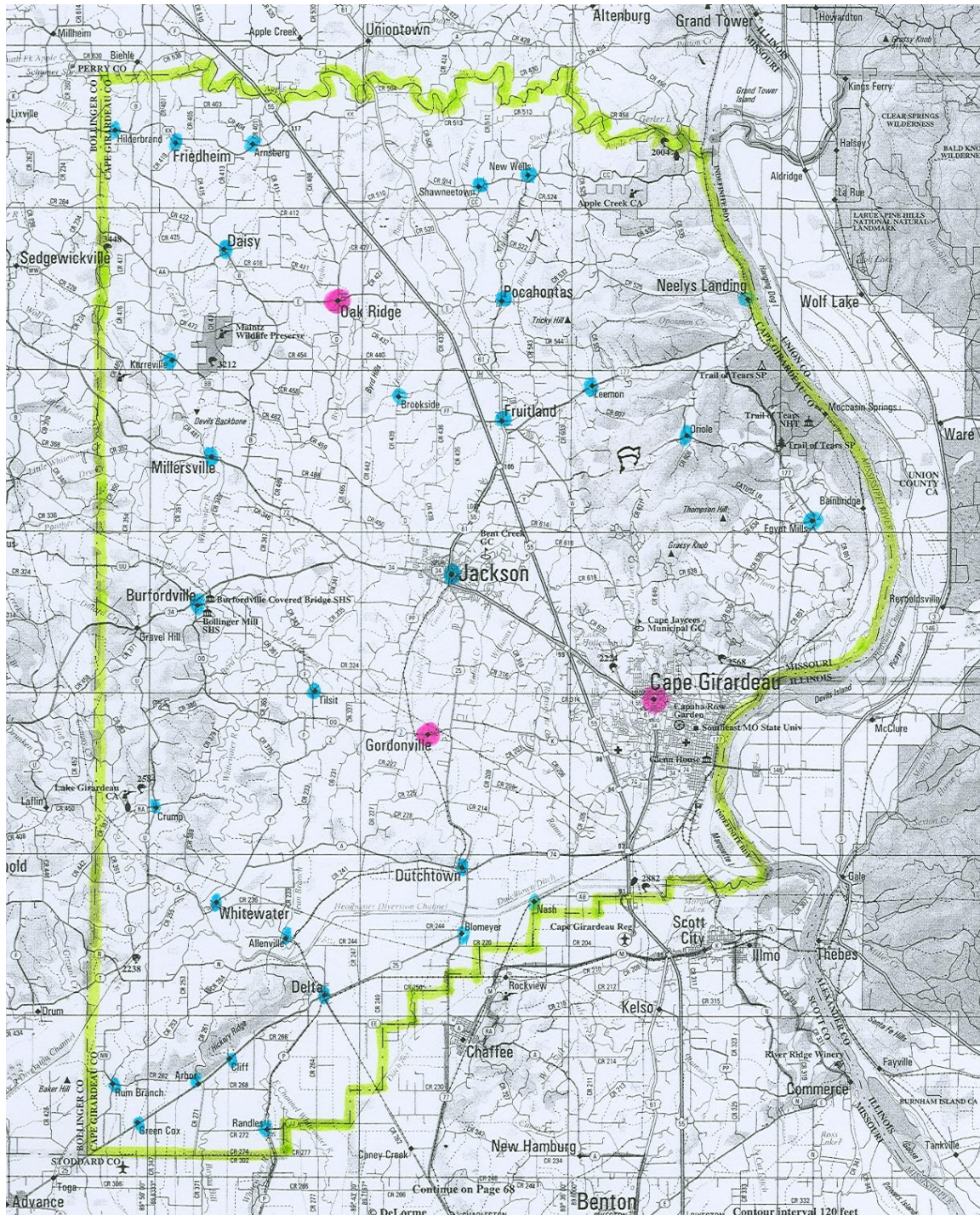
Mesker Brothers Iron Works, so the impact of these companies on the region is visible. All in all, seven Meskers have been positively identified in Cape Girardeau County as Mesker Brothers Iron Works products.

All of the photos included were taken by the author of this study and the tax records were collected in the Cape Girardeau County Assessor's office, division of mapping and appraisal in the County Administration Building at 1 Barton Square in Jackson, Missouri.

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Map of Cape Girardeau County, Missouri:



- Communities containing Meskers
- Communities not containing Meskers
- Boundary of County

429-433 Broadway, Cape Girardeau, Mo.



According to tax records for Cape Girardeau County, this Mesker was built around 1903. Currently A-1 Resale, an antique and consignment shop, this Mesker Brothers Iron Works façade features wide cornice brackets and the “swirly” design, found in many storefronts of the company. The “swirly” design is visible on another Mesker in Cape Girardeau, the Klostermann Block on Spanish Street.



120-124 Main Street, Cape Girardeau, Mo.



Currently Broussard's Cajun Cuisine, this Mesker Brothers storefront was built around 1900, according to county tax records. This two-part commercial block features a brick building and façade combined with a stamped metal cornice and stamped steel window hoods. Note that the cornice brackets feature the fleur-de-lis motif.



Note the deteriorated and partially missing window hood, and the cornice bracket that has been sliced in half to accommodate changes on the façade next door.



The profile of the cornice and cornice bracket on this façade, at 120-124 N. Main St. in Cape Girardeau, offers an excellent example of a typical Mesker Brothers cornice. Note the fleur-de-lis in the center of the face of the cornice bracket in the bottom photo.

7-15 South Spanish Street, Cape Girardeau, Mo.



Historically known as the Klostermann Block, this 5-part commercial block features a rare Mesker Brothers storefront. While definite Mesker Brothers Iron Works characteristics are present—the “swirly” design featured on other building facades of the company, the second story columns, and the recessed entryway to each entrance—this storefront is different from anything listed or described in any available catalogs of the company. That means that it is either a custom-ordered storefront (an option offered by both companies) or a very early storefront completed by the company. According to tax records, the estimated date of construction is 1880, although it is most likely a few years younger. The building currently houses Mollie’s Grill and Bar and the Kelsen Gallery.



Note the “swirly” design repeated throughout the façade. It is distinctly familiar to the details of the pattern on the building at 429-433 Broadway, in Cape Girardeau.

875 State Highway Z, Gordonville, Mo.



Listed in the 1897 Mesker Brother Iron Works catalog as a “testimonial” to possible customers, attesting to the quality, durability, and economic ease of Mesker storefronts, the George F. Siemers Building reads, “G. F. Siemers” along the title line of the cornice. Formerly open as Lucky Find Antiques, this Mesker Brothers façade serves as a example of how entire storefronts could be delivered to customers in rural locations, via railways. The tiny rural community of Gordonville utilized the rail and ease of a Mesker Brothers storefront to create a small central business district for their use. Upon close examination, the remains of the ornamental urns that once were attached on the top edge of the cornice on either side are visible.





Note the ornate details along the cornice brackets. These motifs as well as the decoration on the paired second story columns are both common patterns of Mesker Brothers Iron Works and appear in several catalogs of the company.



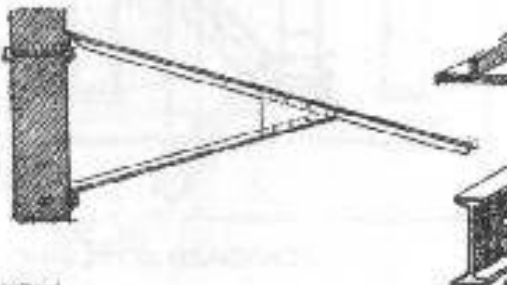
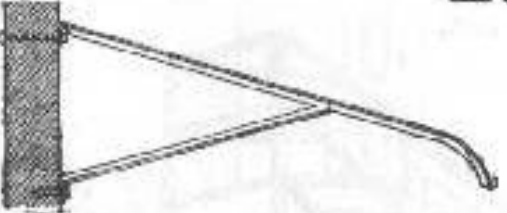

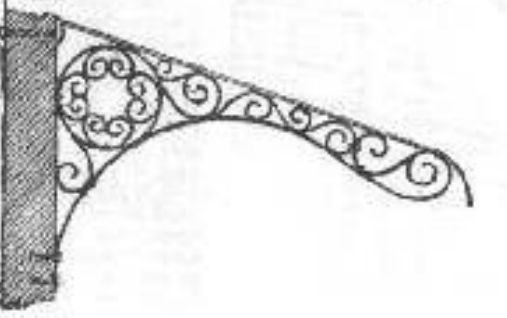
4056 Main Street, Oak Ridge, Mo.



Constructed around 1910, according to the tax assessment records of Cape Girardeau County, this Mesker features a rare wrought iron awning, No. 332 in the 1906 Mesker Brothers Iron Works catalog. The entire frame structure is encased in sheets of brick-face stamped sheet metal and the original entrance is still intact. Formerly Cowan Hardware, and currently June's, this Mesker provides an example of a framed structure, as the elements of these companies could be added to frame or brick buildings.





No. 330.					
6 ft. Projection,	-	each,	\$4.25		
7 "	"	"	4.90		
8 "	"	"	5.20		
9 "	"	"	6.20		
10 "	"	"	6.50		
No. 331					
6 ft. Projection,	-	each,	\$3.65		
7 "	"	"	3.75		
8 "	"	"	3.90		
9 "	"	"	5.20		
10 "	"	"	5.50		
No. 332.					
6 ft. Projection,	-	each,	\$7.80		
7 "	"	"	8.75		
8 "	"	"	9.10		
9 "	"	"	10.40		
10 "	"	"	10.70		
No. 333.					
6 ft. Projection,	-	each,	\$6.50		
7 "	"	"	7.30		
8 "	"	"	8.15		
9 "	"	"	9.10		
10 "	"	"	9.75		

Catalog image courtesy of the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, www.gotmesker.com. Image taken from page 35 of the 1906 Mesker Brothers Catalog.

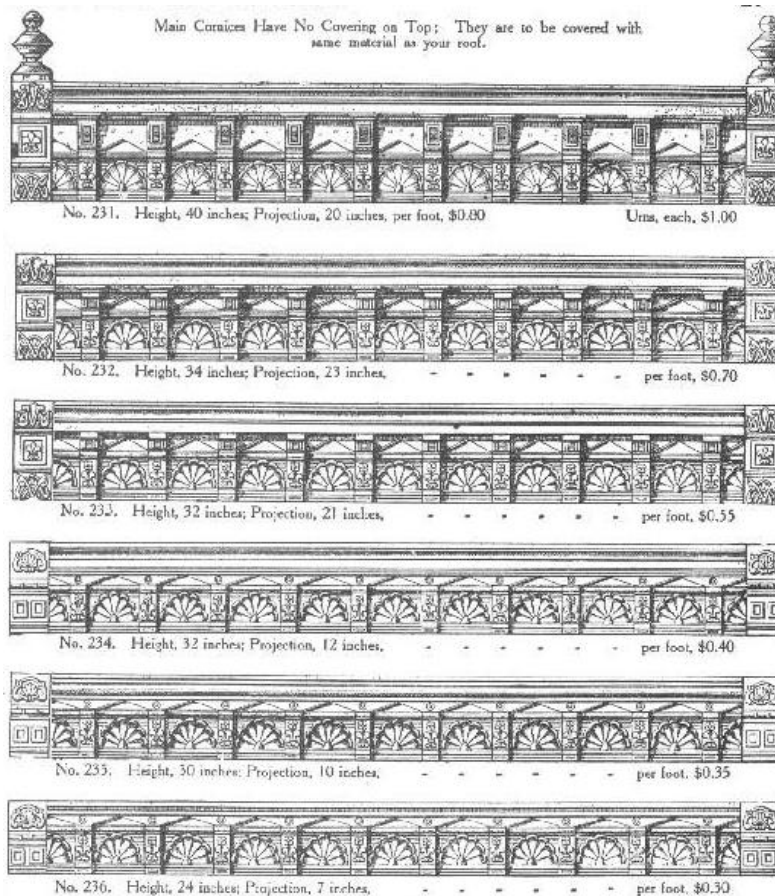
4007 State Highway E, Oak Ridge, Mo.



Formerly Mangels Feed & Produce, this Mesker, constructed in 1907, features a cornice very similar to No. 231 in the 1905 Mesker Brothers Iron Works catalog. Cornice details include the fleur-de-lis and “shell” or “fan” designs below dentils. The remnants of “urns” at the top of the cornice on either side are also visible on this Mesker. Currently, Billie’s Place Furniture, the nameplates are still visible on the cast-iron columns flanking the recessed entryway.



The cornice of “Billie’s Place Furniture” and the image from page 29 of the 1906 Mesker Brothers catalog. Note the similarities between No. 231, the first cornice on the catalog page and the cornice on the building. Catalog image courtesy of the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, www.gotmesker.com.



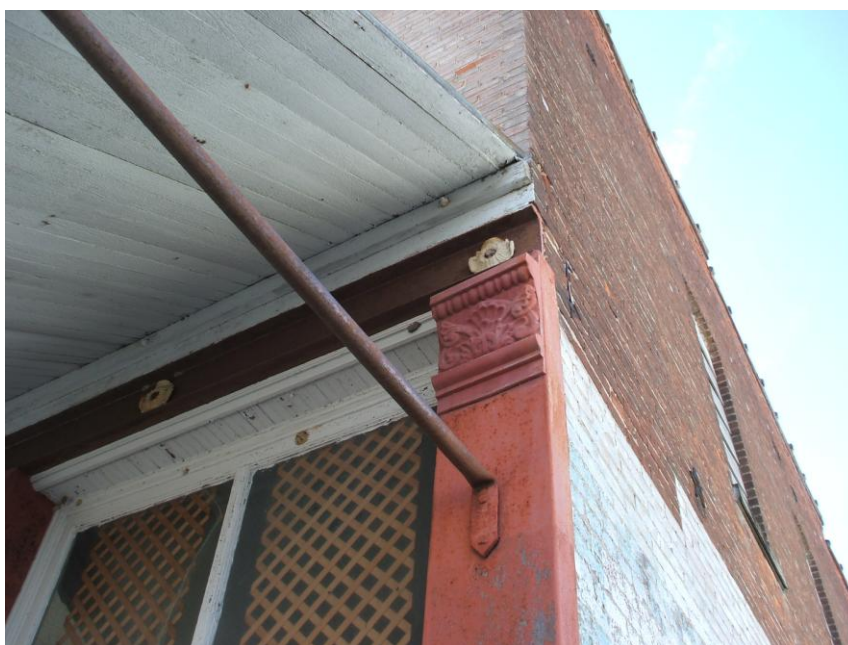
See Page 11 for Terms.

All Prices in this Catalog are Net, F.O.B. Cars St. Louis. No Further Discounts.

Prices on all Cornices are per linear or running foot, and include the End Blocks 13 inches wide. Urns, Pediments and Letters are priced separately—see also page 30—and if wanted with Main Cornices should always be specified on your order. We furnish one Wood Look out with every ten-foot section of Cornice for attaching. Additional Wood Look-outs must be provided by Owner or Carpenter. We allow plenty of metal for lap joints. When ordering always give total length or frontage of building from out to out; state whether for new or old walls of brick, stone or wood.



Though slightly affected by rust, the inscription, “Mesker Bros. Front Builders St. Louis MO.” appears on the cast-iron column to the right of the front entrance. Below “St. Louis MO.” the date of their first storefront patent (Oct. 4, 1887) is also included on the nameplate although it is illegible in this photograph.

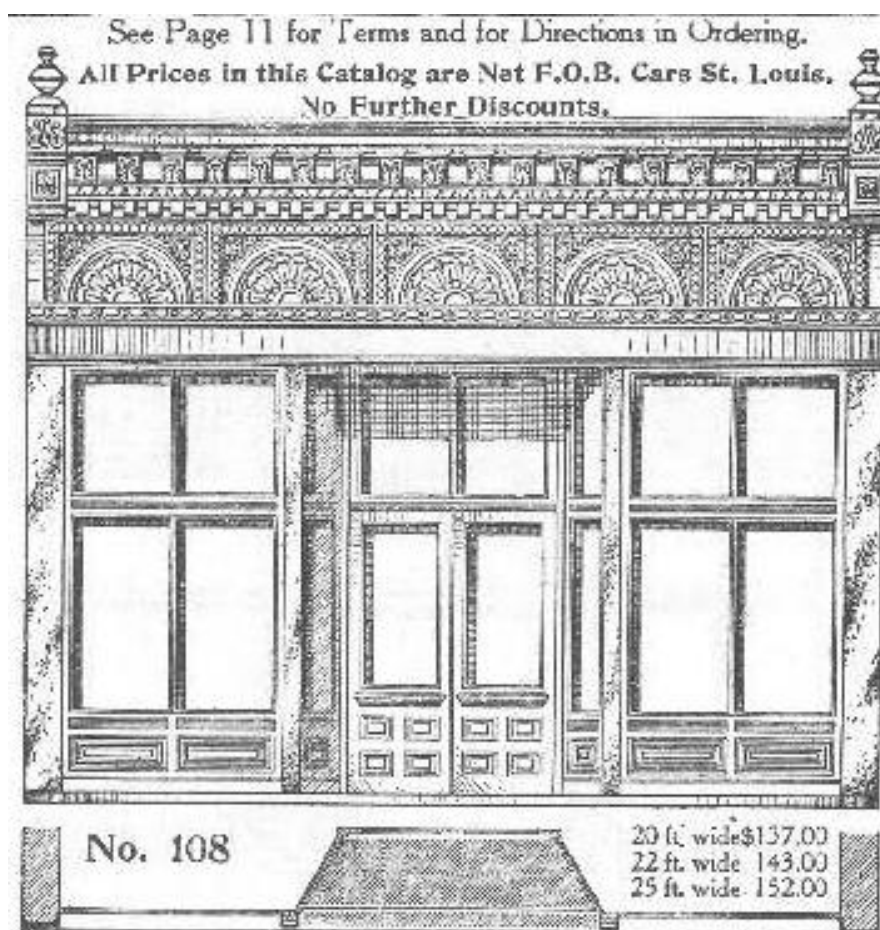


State Highway E, Oak Ridge, Mo.



Constructed around 1905, the Village of Oak Ridge Town Hall is one of two coordinating Meskers found side-by-side in Oak Ridge, along State Highway E. This frame building features a cornice similar to No. 108 in the 1906 Mesker Brothers catalog, showcasing the “shell” or “fan” design and the fleur-de-lis on the cornice brackets.





Note the similarities between the cornice and storefront discovered in Oak Ridge and the image from page 3 in the 1906 Mesker Brothers Iron Works Catalog. Also note the price of \$137 for the whole storefront—including windows and doors—in a 20 ft. width. Image courtesy of the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, www.gotmesker.com.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY: MESKER

Unpublished Sources:

Collections and Archives

Mesker Brothers Iron Works Records, 1879-1953. Collection sl331 Western Historical Manuscript Collection, University of Missouri—St. Louis, (Accessed May 25, 2008).

This collection of papers and records of the Mesker Brothers Iron Works Company of St. Louis was loaned by David Mesker, a descendent of Frank Mesker to the Western Historical Manuscript Collection. Duplicated onto microfilm, this collection is now available for inter-library loan and contains not only personal papers, but records of the company as well. In particular, this collection contains trade catalogues from the company—1888, 1891, 1892, 1895, 1898, and the 1903 Louisiana Purchase Exposition edition—and “Ben’s Bible,” an account book created and carried by Ben (Bernard) Mesker, the elder brother of the company. Also included is the original patent held by Frank Mesker, the younger brother, for galvanized pressed metal columns—providing an advantage over his brother, George of George L. Mesker & Co. of Evansville, Indiana.

St. Louis Foundry Collection. Missouri History Museum, St. Louis.

While not listed in the on-line indexes of the Missouri History Museum Research Center, there are several items in this collection pertaining to the Mesker Brothers Iron Works, located in St. Louis. Items in this collection include documents pertaining to the company and an article written by Darius Bryjka and published by the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, which administers www.gotmesker.com.

Tax Assessment Records. Cape Girardeau County Assessor’s Office, Jackson, Missouri.
(Accessed March 20, 2009).

These records provide approximate dates for construction as well as other information about the condition and changes that have been made to a particular building over time. Also, the names of the current owners are listed, as well as the addresses of each building. Rarely, they discuss changes, such as the addition of a galvanized cornice or entire pressed front to an existing structure.

Interviews and Letters

Bryjka, Darius. Interviewed by author. 9 March 2009.

The administrator of www.gotmesker.com, Darius Bryjka, provides insight into the identification of Meskers across the country. While focusing his efforts within the state of Illinois, and working with the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, Darius maintains a database in the form of a Google Earth file, listing all historic and current locations of Meskers across the country. He is the authority on the history and work of the Mesker Companies.

Published Sources

Builders' and Decorator's Trade Journals

Weekly Compendium. Official Organ of the Building Trades Council, 1896-1897.

These publications chronicle developments in the clash between Mesker Brothers Iron Works and the push for them to work with labor unions. They refused to rely on union labor, and remained independent, despite criticism from many of their competitors. The *Weekly Compendium*, found in the Mesker Brothers Iron Works collection in the Western Historical Manuscript Collection in St. Louis, also shows what other companies were producing at the same time as the two Mesker companies and sets the setting to understand their role in the industrial revolution and the development of an American commercial style of architecture.

Trade Catalog Collections

Missouri History Museum, St. Louis.

The Missouri History Museum Research Center houses trade catalogs and information on many of the foundries in Missouri, particularly though based out of St. Louis.

Winterthur Museum and Library, Wilmington, Delaware.

Paper copies of catalogs of both Mesker Brothers Iron Works and George L. Mesker & Company are available at the Winterthur Museum and Library. Finding aids published online list the catalogs within the holdings of their library.

Periodical Articles

Bryjka, Darius. "Sibling Rivalry Good for Illinois Architecture: The Meskers' Sheet-Metal Businesses." *Historic Illinois*, Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, Division of Preservation Services, 28 (April 2006): 3-9.

An excellent introduction to the history of Mesker Brothers Iron Works and George L. Mesker & Co., this article offers how to identify their products and discusses their role in the development of the built environment of the central business districts across America. Written for the general public, this is an excellent guide to share with Mesker property owners that provides clear images of Meskers and their history. Also includes a photo of the brothers at the wedding of Frank Mesker.

Davis, Rich. "Putting steel into the city Evansville's Mesker buildings." *Evansville Courier & Press*, February 26, 2008. <http://www.courierpress.com/news/2008/feb/26/putting-steel-into-the-city-evansvilles-mesker/> (accessed June 3, 2008).

This newspaper article shares a discussion with Tom Lonnberg, curator of the Evansville Museum. The museum hosted an exhibit, "Storefronts of America: The Mesker Story," which discussed the importance of the Mesker companies. Due to the location of the museum, in Evansville, Indiana, where George L. Mesker & Co. was located, more material was shared on this company through various exhibits that included remnants of storefronts as well as catalog images.

Dierickx, Mary B. "Leaves of Iron: Stamped Metal Ornament." *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts*, Vol. 9, Metalwork Theme Issue (Summer 1988): 44-59.

This well-illustrated article discusses the role of stamped metal ornament in America, beginning in the later half of the 19th century. While not mentioning Mesker specifically, the information set out in her work, particularly the discussion of the processes used to create pressed metal ornament is particularly helpful in discussing the work of the Mesker companies.

Fieser, Hallie. "At the Forefront of Storefronts: Frank, Ben, and George Mesker." *Exceptional Places*, Publication of the National Park Service, Division of Cultural Resources, Midwest Region, 3 (Fall 2008): 1, 6-7.

This article, written for the general public as a part of an internship with the National Park Service, provides an overview of both George L. Mesker & Co. and Mesker Brothers Iron Works and served as a starting point for me to formulate the argument of this study.

Fisher, Charles E. and Lauren Van Damme. "Repair and Reproduction of Metal Canopies and Marquees with Glass Pendants." *Preservation Tech Notes: Metals* 6. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service (October 2006):1-8.

This Preservation Tech Note focuses on the repair and reproduction of metal canopies, some of which were manufactured by both Mesker Brothers Iron Works and George L. Mesker & Co. Other companies that utilized trade catalogs are featured as well.

Fuener, Cythia A. "Mesker Seekers Find Success: Got Mesker?" *Historic Illinois*, Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, Division of Preservation Services, 30 (April 2008): 12.

This brief article appears in the newsletter *Historic Illinois*, and offers an update on the progress of the Got Mesker? campaign in Illinois. Since April 2006, nearly 600 Mesker storefronts have been identified and documented in Illinois. A complete list of these findings is available at www.gotmesker.com.

Jandl, H. Ward. "Rehabilitating Historic Storefronts." *Preservation Brief 11*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service (September 1982): 1-16. Accessed online February 19, 2009). <http://www.nps.gov/history/hps/tps/briefs/brief11.htm>

This technical guide, produced by the National Park Service, provides a guide to the care, preservation, and rehabilitation of historic storefronts. One section is dedicated to the rehab of historic metal storefronts, which would include those of the Mesker companies. Repair, replacement, cleaning, and painting are the topics discussed in this section.

Lonnberg, Thomas. "Evansville Museum Exhibit Tells the Mesker Story." *Preserving Indiana*, Indiana Department of Natural Resources, Division of Historic Preservation and Archaeology, (Spring Summer 2008): 3-15.

Written by Tom Lonnberg, the curator of History, at the Evansville Museum of Arts, History, and Science, this article discusses the exhibit, "Storefronts of America: The Mesker Story." This temporary exhibit appeared February 17-May 25, 2008, and shared the history of both Mesker Brothers Iron Works and George L. Mesker & Co., although much of the material focused on George L. Mesker, due to the location of the museum being in the same town as that of his foundry and company headquarters.

Park, Sharon C. "The Use of Substitute Materials on Historic Building Exteriors" *Preservation Brief 16*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service (September 1988): 1-15. (Accessed online February 19, 2009).
<http://www.nps.gov/history/hps/tps/briefs/brief16.htm>

This Preservation Brief, produced by the National Park Service, provides a guide to the use of implementing substitute materials on historic building exteriors, including pressed metal and cast-iron storefronts. The importance of using these substitutes only when the original material is missing or cannot be reworked is stressed in this publication.

Pieper, Richard. "Restoring Metal Roof Cornices." *Preservation Tech Notes: Metals 2*. National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior (October 1990).

This illustrated Tech Notes handout provides a guide to the restoration and care of metal roofs and cornices. The most helpful part of this pamphlet is the detailed diagrams showing the construction and attaching mechanisms of pressed metal cornices.

Randl, Chad. "The Use of Awnings on Historic Buildings: Repair, Replacement, & New Design." *Preservation Brief 44*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service (April 2005): 1-15. (Accessed online February 19, 2009).
<http://www.nps.gov/history/hps/tps/briefs/brief44.htm>

This Preservation Brief, produced by the National Park Service, provides a guide to the repair, replacement, and new design of awnings on historic buildings. As this guide explains, awnings need to be compatible with the configuration and scale of the original when working with historic buildings. Along with pressed metal and cast iron elements of storefronts, both Mesker Brothers Iron Works and George L. Mesker & Co. manufactured and produced awnings, many of which still remain on identified Meskers.

“Reviewed work: *Cheap, Quick, and Easy: Imitative Architectural Materials, 1870-1930.*”
Winterthur Portfolio. University of Chicago Press on behalf of the Henry Francis du
Pont Winterthur Museum, Inc. 35 (Spring 2000): 123-124.

This book review of *Cheap, Quick, and Easy*, by Pamela H. Simpson, reinforces the aim of her work—to not only draw attention to various substitute materials, but to also share the debate surrounding their use.

Simpson, Pamela H. “Cheap, Quick, and Easy, Part II: Pressed Metal Ceilings.” In *Gender, Class and Shelter, Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture V*, edited by Elizabeth C. Cromley and Carter L. Hudgins, 152-63. Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1995.

Part of a compilation on works regarding vernacular architecture, this article, written by Pamela Simpson, author of *Cheap, Quick, and Easy: Imitative Architectural Materials, 1870-1930*, discusses the history and debate regarding the use of pressed metal ceilings. Both Mesker Brothers Iron Works and George L. Mesker & Co. manufactured and featured in their catalogs pressed metal ceilings, in addition to their storefronts and “house fronts.”

“State and Local News.” *Forum News*. National Trust for Historic Preservation, XIV (May/June 2008): 4.

The Illinois section of this newsletter discusses the Got Mesker? project through the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, led by Darius Bryjka. The article mentions that more than 50,000 buildings in all 50 states, as well as locations beyond, were designed, manufactured, shipped, and installed by the Mesker companies.

Waite, John G. “The Maintenance and Repair of Architectural Cast Iron.” *Preservation Brief* 27. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service (October 1991): 1-17. (Accessed online February 19, 2009).
<http://www.nps.gov/history/hps/tps/briefs/brief27.htm>

Available in print and online, this guide to the preservation and care of architectural cast iron not only provides guidelines but also uses colorful, clear pictures to indicate and show the different parts and conditions of various elements and metals. This would be an appropriate guide to share with property owners concerned with the care of their Mesker storefronts.

Wyman, Tom. “Evansville Firm Becomes Iron Giant.” *Indiana Preservationist*. Historic Landmarks Foundation of Indiana, 5 (September/October 2005): 4-5.
<http://www.historiclandmarks.org/SiteCollectionDocuments/Preservationist%20PDFs/IP%205%2005%20Mesker%20Iron%20Works%20article.pdf>, (accessed March 31, 2009).

This newsletter article provides a brief history of the Evansville iron giant, George L. Mesker & Co. Photos of storefronts and buildings that showcase these cast iron and sheet metal panels are included in the article, which is available in the archives of the *Indiana Preservationist* online.

Books

Bakewell & Mullins Victorian Architectural Sheet-Metal Ornaments: A Reprint of the 1887 Catalogue. Don Mills, Toronto, Canada: General Publishing Company, Ltd., 1999.

Originally titled, *Designs of Architectural Ornaments Manufactured in Sheet Zinc, Brass, or Copper by Bakewell & Mullins*, this reprint of an original catalog is unabridged. This very clear copy of an original trade catalog, offers insight into trade catalogs of the era when the Mesker companies were at their height.

Friedman, Donald. *Historical Building Construction: Design, Materials, and Technology.* New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995.

This book discusses the history of building construction in the United States. Organized by time periods, several eras are of particular significance for the Mesker companies and their legacy: cast-iron façades (1847-1875), the emergence of the steel skeleton frame (1870-1904), the fireproof building (1872-1960s) and the standardization of steel framing (1870s-1921). Written with a structural engineer or architect in mind, this book offers a very technical approach to the development of building construction in America.

Gayle, Margot, David W. Look, and John G. Waite. *Metals in America's Historic Buildings: Uses and Preservation Treatments.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1992.

This book discusses various metals found in America's historic buildings and is divided into two parts. Part I is a historical survey of metal, and included discussions of the various uses of metal in the built environment in the United States. Part II serves as a guide to the identifying deterioration and methods of preserving metals. Chapter 7: Iron and Iron Alloys, provides a complete overview of the uses of Iron and Iron Alloys, used by both of the Mesker companies. Chapter 17: Iron and Iron Alloys; Preservation and Repair, discusses remediation and preservation techniques for dealing with the metals produced by both Mesker Brothers Iron Works and George L. Mesker & Co. Like most of the National Park Service publications, this book provides an extensive bibliography which provides in-depth resources for each of the varying types of metal discussed.

Jester, Thomas C., ed. *Twentieth-Century Building Materials: History and Conservation.* McGraw-Hill, 1995.

While this book, published by the National Park Service, discusses building materials of the twentieth century, the Mesker companies and their contributions are not discussed. This guide does, however, showcase and describe the many materials that followed in the century after their work as well as some of the areas that the companies moved into after the height of their popularity at the turn of the century.

Longstreth, Richard. *The Buildings of Main Street: A Guide To American Commercial Architecture*. Washington, DC: The Preservation Press, 1987.

This uniquely-sized book discusses the various forms of American Commercial Architecture. Instead of focusing on the companies that developed various products for storefronts or the materials used, this guide focuses on the form of the buildings and the styles that they assumed as commercial architecture emerged with the industrial revolution. Many of the examples used in the book are Meskers, although credit is not given to that fact.

Moore, Kurt R. *Research Bibliography of Architectural Blacksmithing and Ironworking*. Monticello, Illinois: Vance Bibliographies, August 1981.

This bibliography focuses on wrought iron architectural details, trade catalogs including wrought iron, and academic works that discuss the processes of blacksmithing and ironworking. While examples and works from around the world are featured and cited, the most helpful citations are those that deal with American companies and their catalogs and designs. Many of these pre-date the Mesker companies and help to shed light on their inspiration for designs.

Robertson, E. Graeme and Joan Robertson. *Cast Iron Decoration: A World Survey*. New York: Whitney Library of Design, an imprint of Watson-Guption Publications, 1977.

This illustrated survey shares the prevalence and varying detail of cast iron architectural elements, not only in the United States, but around the world. The Mesker companies and their designs were influenced by these classical and ornate elements and even created cast elements themselves that were featured in their catalogs.

Romaine, Lawrence B. *A Guide to American Trade Catalogs: 1744-1900*. New York: R.R. Bowker Company, 1960.

This book is an excellent guide to American Trade Catalogs. Not only does this book list the names and brief histories of many important companies that utilized trade catalogs between 1744 and 1900, but it also provides the locations of the catalogs that were known to exist in 1960. John B. Mesker, George L. Mesker & Co. and Mesker & Brother are listed as well as the repositories that hold their catalogs—in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Missouri Historical Society in St. Louis.

Simpson, Pamela H. *Cheap, Quick, & Easy: Imitative Architectural Materials, 1870-1930*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999.

This is the only academic text that discusses the Mesker companies directly. Used as a part of a larger argument concerning the debate of using imitative architectural materials—whether they are cheap, quick, and easy solutions to building issues or if they are simply “imitative jimcrackery.”

Victorian Ironwork: A Catalogue by J. B. Wickersham. Philadelphia: Athenaeum Library of Nineteenth Century America, 1977.

A reprint of an 1857 J.B. Wickersham catalog, this book features an introduction by Margot Gayle, the author of *Metals in America's Historic Buildings*. This introduction sets the stage for the trade catalog market and discusses the work of companies other than J.B. Wickersham. While this catalog predates the work of the Mesker companies, the designs from this company and others influenced the designs of the brothers Mesker.

Waite, Diana S., ed. *Architectural Elements: The Technological Revolution*. Princeton: The Pyne Press, 1972.

Assembled from the American Historical Catalog Collection, this book includes catalogs from the following companies: Marshall, Lefferts & Brother (1854), Buffalo Eagle Iron Works (1859), Morris, Tasker & Co. (1860), Philadelphia Architectural Iron Co. (1872), Keystone Mantel & Slate Works (1872), and George O. Stevens (1879). These catalogs feature products from iron works, as well as slate countertops and mantels, windows, and doors, and offer insight into the expanding trade catalog culture of the mid- to late-1800s and early 1900s.

Catalogs

George L. Mesker & Co. *George L. Mesker & Co. Architectural Iron Works, Evansville, Indiana*. 1892 edition. Evansville Vanderburgh Public Library Electronic Books Database, <http://ebooks.evpl.org/views/book.asp?bookid=29> (Assessed March 31, 2009).

_____. *Architectural Iron Works, Evansville, Indiana*. 1903 edition. Manuscripts and Special Collections, University of Illinois at Springfield. http://collections.carli.illinois.edu/cdm4/document.php?CISOROOT=/uis_msc&CISOPTR=144&CISOSHOW=96 (Assessed March 31, 2009).

_____. *Evansville, Ind., U.S.A. Designers & Manufacturers of Store Fronts*, 1904 edition. Evansville Vanderburgh Public Library Electronic Books Database, <http://ebooks.evpl.org/views/book.asp?bookid=27> (Accessed March 31, 2009).

_____. 1905 edition. Evansville Vanderburgh Public Library Electronic Books Database, <http://ebooks.evpl.org/views/book.asp?bookid=26> (Accessed March 31, 2009).

_____. *Storefronts*. 1909 edition. Evansville Vanderburgh Public Library Electronic Books Database, <http://ebooks.evpl.org/views/book.asp?bookid=28> (Accessed March 31, 2009).

_____. *Mesker Store Fronts and Metal Building Products*. 1928 edition. Evansville Vanderburgh Public Library Electronic Books Database, <http://ebooks.evpl.org/views/book.asp?bookid=30> (Accessed March 31, 2009).

Mesker Brothers Iron Works. *Architectural Catalog of Galvanized Iron Works: New Designs and Ornaments*. 1888 edition. Western Historical Manuscripts Collection (WHMC)—St. Louis. Collection sl331 Mesker Brothers Iron Works Records, 1879-1953. (Accessed on microfilm May 25, 2008).

_____. *Mesker & Bro. Galvanized Iron Works*. Sixth edition, 1889. Western Historical Manuscripts Collection—St. Louis. Collection sl331 Mesker Brothers Iron Works Records, 1879-1953. (Accessed on microfilm May 25, 2008).

_____. *Mesker & Bro. Galvanized Iron Works*. Ninth edition, 1891. Western Historical Manuscripts Collection—St. Louis. Collection sl331 Mesker Brothers Iron Works Records, 1879-1953. (Accessed on microfilm May 25, 2008).

_____. *Mesker Bros. Iron Works*. Tenth edition, 1892. Western Historical Manuscripts Collection—St. Louis. Collection sl331 Mesker Brothers Iron Works Records, 1879-1953. (Accessed on microfilm May 25, 2008).

_____. *Mesker Bros. Iron Works*. Eleventh edition, 1895. Western Historical Manuscripts Collection—St. Louis. Collection sl331 Mesker Brothers Iron Works Records, 1879-1953. (Accessed on microfilm May 25, 2008).

_____. *Mesker Bros. Iron Works*. Fifteenth edition, 1898. Western Historical Manuscripts Collection—St. Louis. Collection sl331 Mesker Brothers Iron Works Records, 1879-1953. (Accessed on microfilm May 25, 2008).

_____. *Mesker Bros. Iron Works*. World's Fair, Louisiana Purchase, 1903 edition. Western Historical Manuscripts Collection—St. Louis. Collection sl331 Mesker Brothers Iron Works Records, 1879-1953. (Accessed on microfilm May 25, 2008).

_____. *Mesker and Bro. St. Louis, Mo. U.S.A. Manufacturers of Complete House Fronts*. Twenty-third edition, 1906. Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, http://www.illinoishistory.gov/gotmesker/Mesker_Catalog.pdf (Accessed online March 31, 2009).

The catalogs from the company serve as an excellent primary source. Used to market their storefronts to Main Street businessmen who wanted to start up new businesses quickly and easily, these catalogs cut out the middle man wholesaler, and allowed the companies to ship their products directly to customers, via rail. While designs varied from year to year, both companies retained the stamps for patterns allowing them to continue to make designs from previous catalogs and custom designs, depending on the dimensions and tastes of the new entrepreneurs.

Electronic Sources

Bryjka, Darius. "Got Mesker: Identification Guide to Sheet-Metal Facades and Building Components Manufactured by Mesker Brothers Iron Works & George L. Mesker & Company." Illinois Historic Preservation Agency. <http://www.gotmesker.com> (accessed March 25, 2009)

With excellent color pictures of Mesker elements, this guide allows those unfamiliar with Mesker to identify Meskers as well as tell the difference between the common characteristics of each of the two companies. Each section identifies a section of the façade and then offers details from Mesker Bros. Iron Works and George L. Mesker & Co. Had this guide not been updated during the course of this study, the Mesker porch found in Oak Ridge would not have been correctly identified.

"History Building." A Photo Gallery. Evansville, Indiana: Evansville Courier & Press. <http://www.courierpress.com/photos/galleries/2008/feb/25/history-building/> (Accessed September 19, 2008).

The photo gallery includes examples of Meskers in Evansville as well as a portrait of the Mesker family gathered for the wedding of Frank Mesker and Pauline Gehner Mesker in 1903, which includes Frank, Bernard, George, and John Mesker, the brothers and their father, respectively. This is the only photo of the brothers readily available.

"Got Mesker?" Illinois Historic Preservation Agency. Administered by Darius Bryjka <http://www.gotmesker.com> (Accessed March 1, 2009.)

This website, administered by Darius Bryjka for the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency serves as a guide to the identification of Meskers across the country. The various sources listed within the links provide information regarding both of the Mesker companies, a list of the Meskers identified in Illinois, an interactive Google Earth file of Meskers identified across the country and around the world, and various links to articles and catalogs regarding the companies and their history. Also, the identification guide and flickr.com picture links provide many examples for those who are unsure if they have identified a Mesker.

Illinois Historic Preservation Agency and Illinois Main Street. "Anatomy of a Main Street Building." <http://www.gotmesker.com> (accessed March 1, 2009)

This clear and concise page identifies the various pieces of a Main Street storefront building. Without the clarification of the parts, the Got Mesker Identification Guide would have not been as easy to use. Also, knowing the names for each of the parts of a storefront allows proper explanation and identification of Mesker elements.

“Mesker Door History.” Mesker Door: The Oldest Hollow Metal Door Company in the United States, Huntsville, Alabama. <http://www.oldestmetaldoor.com/> (Accessed online March 28, 2009).

This interactive timeline shares the history of the Mesker Door Company, what is left of Mesker Brothers Iron Works. No longer in the family, the business moved from St. Louis to Huntsville, Alabama in 1988, and claims to be the oldest hollow metal door company in the United States.