

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions.

### 1. Name of Property

Historic name: Matthews, Mary H., Lustron House

Other names/site number: Site #PU5894

Name of related multiple property listing:

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

### 2. Location

Street & number: 5021 Maryland Avenue

City or town: Little Rock State: Arkansas County: Pulaski

Not For Publication:  Vicinity:

### 3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,

I hereby certify that this X nomination \_\_\_ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.

In my opinion, the property X meets \_\_\_ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:

\_\_\_ national X statewide \_\_\_ local

Applicable National Register Criteria:

\_\_\_ A \_\_\_ B X C \_\_\_ D

Signature of certifying official/Title:

Date

Arkansas Historic Preservation Program

State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

In my opinion, the property \_\_\_ meets \_\_\_ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of commenting official:

Date

Title :

State or Federal agency/bureau  
or Tribal Government

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#### 4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

- entered in the National Register
- determined eligible for the National Register
- determined not eligible for the National Register
- removed from the National Register
- other (explain:) \_\_\_\_\_

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Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

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#### 5. Classification

##### Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply.)

- Private:
- Public – Local
- Public – State
- Public – Federal

##### Category of Property

(Check only **one** box.)

- Building(s)
- District
- Site
- Structure
- Object

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**Number of Resources within Property**

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>1</u>	<u>          </u>	buildings
<u>          </u>	<u>          </u>	sites
<u>          </u>	<u>          </u>	structures
<u>          </u>	<u>          </u>	objects
<u>1</u>	<u>          </u>	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register           

**6. Function or Use**

**Historic Functions**

(Enter categories from instructions.)

DOMESTIC/single dwelling  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Current Functions**

(Enter categories from instructions.)

VACANT/NOT IN USE  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

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## 7. Description

### Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions.)

OTHER/Lustron

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**Materials:** (enter categories from instructions.)

Principal exterior materials of the property: STEEL

### Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current physical appearance and condition of the property. Describe contributing and noncontributing resources if applicable. Begin with a **summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, type, style, method of construction, setting, size, and significant features. Indicate whether the property has historic integrity.)

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#### Summary Paragraph

The Mary H. Matthews Lustron House is an example of the Westchester Model 02 design offered by the Lustron Corporation in the late 1940s. The house is one-story tall and is built on a concrete-block foundation. The house features a steel frame and the walls are covered in the iconic square porcelain-enameled steel panels. The low-pitched gable roof is also covered in porcelain-enameled steel roof tiles, and the gable ends are covered in steel panels with a vertical board pattern on them. The house retains its original metal-framed windows.

The house also has an addition on the south side. The wood-framed addition with a flat roof is covered in weatherboard siding. The addition is fenestrated by three-pane windows, and also has a large brick chimney on the west side. An open carport extends to the south of the addition.

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#### Narrative Description

The Mary H. Matthews Lustron House is an example of the Westchester Model 02 design offered by the Lustron Corporation in the late 1940s. The "02" designation referred to the fact that this version of the model had two bedrooms, along with the kitchen, dining room, living room, bathroom, and utility room. Measuring 31 feet by 35 feet, the original portion of the

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house contains 1,085 square feet. It also features a 6' x 12' recessed porch at the northwest corner.

The house is one-story tall and is built on a concrete-block foundation. The house features a steel frame and the walls are covered in gray, square, porcelain-enameled steel panels. The low-pitched gable roof is also covered in green porcelain-enameled steel roof tiles, and the gable ends are covered in white steel panels with a vertical board pattern on them. The house retains its original metal-framed windows, and the windows on the west side, along with the porch, are shaded by metal green-and-white awnings.

The house also has an addition on the south side. The wood-framed addition with a flat roof is covered in weatherboard siding. The addition is fenestrated by three-pane windows, and also has a large brick chimney on the west side. An open carport extends to the south of the addition.

### **Front/North Façade**

The front façade of the house is basically divided in half. The left portion of the façade is dominated by the metal-framed picture window located slightly to the left of the façade's center. The window features a large central pane that is flanked by four-pane casement windows on each side. To the left of the window, set high in the wall, is a kitchen fan.

The right half of the façade contains the recessed front porch. The house's main entrance features an original metal door with a central rectangular window. The entrance also features a metal storm door that was added later. To the right of the entrance is a window air-conditioner unit.

The corner of the porch is supported by the distinctive Lustron porch post which features a vertical post and cantilevered post that are separated by a decorative serpentine piece of metal. The porch also features a wraparound metal awning.

### **Side/West Façade**

The west side of the house, at the north end, encompasses the recessed front porch. To the right of the porch, roughly in the middle of the original house's façade, is a projecting bay with a metal-framed picture window. Like the picture window on the front façade, the window features a large central pane that is flanked by four-pane casement windows on each side. At the south end of the original section of the house is another picture window that features a large central pane that is flanked by four-pane casement windows on each side. Both picture windows are shaded by green-and-white metal awnings.

Continuing south along the façade, the rest of the façade is comprised of the house's addition. The west side of the addition is dominated by a large brick chimney that tapers halfway up its height. To the right of the chimney is a three-pane window followed by the west side of the open, shed-roofed carport.

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### **Rear/South Façade**

The south façade of the house is encompassed by the addition. At the west end of the façade is a three-pane window followed by a plate-glass sliding door. To the right of the sliding door, the rest of the façade is devoid of fenestration. In front of the addition, the façade is dominated by the open, shed-roofed carport.

Above the addition, the gable end of the original house is visible, and like the gable end on the front façade, it is covered in steel panels with a vertical board pattern on them. The original south façade of the house would have had four square, single pane windows, two near the east end and two near the west end of the façade.

### **Side/East Façade**

Beginning at the north end of the east façade there is a metal-framed casement window with three panes in each half, followed by an entrance leading into the kitchen. The entrance has an original metal door with a central rectangular window and an aluminum screen door. To the south of the entrance is a metal-framed three-pane casement window that provides light and ventilation to the bathroom. At the south end of the façade of the house's original portion is a picture window. The picture window, like the others found on the house, features a large central pane that is flanked by four-pane casement windows on each side. To the south of the southern picture window is a porch support that matches the one on the front porch.

The east side of the addition is devoid of fenestration. At the south end of the façade is the east side of the open carport.

### **Interior**

The interior of the Matthews House, for the most part still reflects the plan and design of the house when it left the Lustron factory. The only alteration to the plan has been the removal of the two bedroom closets and the small closet at the end of the hall. However, this was done to extend the hallway in order to provide access to the addition.

The interior retains its original vertical steel wall paneling and ceiling panels. It also retains the original built-ins in the bedroom, living room and dining room. The kitchen retains the original upper cabinets, although the original lower cabinets have been removed. The bathroom also retains the original bathtub. The original heating system has been replaced, which necessitated the installation of some new ductwork, but it is easily removable.

Also in the two bedrooms, the original window openings are clearly visible, and have been filled in with peg-board. The size of the bedroom windows, which are moderately sized, indicate that the house is a later version of the Westchester model. The earliest versions of the Westchester had pairs of small slit windows set high in the wall that provided light to the bedrooms. The second version had a small single window in each bedroom while the third version had a moderately-sized window in each bedroom.

The interior of the addition reflects its 1960s construction, with wood paneling and the brick fireplace. The upper part of the house's original exterior wall and the original window openings

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are also visible in the addition. It is also believed that the original steel panels are behind the paneling on the lower part of the wall.

### **Integrity**

The exterior of the original portion of the house has excellent integrity retaining its original porcelain-enameled steel panels, original roof, and its original windows. The largest change to the house's integrity was the construction of the addition on the south side at an unknown date. However, the addition is relatively small in scale in comparison to the overall size of the house. Furthermore, the flat roof of the addition does not compete with height of the original house. Also, even with the addition, the plan and unique method of construction of the original Lustron house is clearly evident and recognizable.

Furthermore, if the addition were removed, it appears that the original southern exterior wall of the house could be restored relatively easily. At least some of the steel panels are visible on the inside of the addition, and it is believed that the panels remain under the paneling in the rest of the wall. In addition, the original window openings and frames remain in place.

The interior of the Matthews House also retains excellent integrity. For the most part, the original plan of the house is intact with the exception of the removal of the bedroom closets to provide access to the addition. However, the rest of the interior retains its original vertical steel wall paneling and ceiling panels. It also retains the original built-ins in the bedroom, living room and dining room. The kitchen retains the original upper cabinets, although the original lower cabinets have been removed. The bathroom also retains the original bathtub. As a result, it is very easy to see the design and unique features that are so indicative of a Lustron house.

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## 8. Statement of Significance

### Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A. Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B. Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C. Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D. Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

### Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

- A. Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes
- B. Removed from its original location
- C. A birthplace or grave
- D. A cemetery
- E. A reconstructed building, object, or structure
- F. A commemorative property
- G. Less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years

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**Areas of Significance**  
(Enter categories from instructions.)

ARCHITECTURE  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Period of Significance**  
c.1949  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Significant Dates**  
c.1949  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Significant Person**  
(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Cultural Affiliation**  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Architect/Builder**  
Beckman and Blass, Architects  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

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**Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph** (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance, applicable criteria, justification for the period of significance, and any applicable criteria considerations.)

The Mary H. Matthews Lustron House is a good example of the porcelain-enameled steel Lustron House of the late 1940s, which was developed as a pre-fabricated house that could be erected cheaply and quickly on its site. The Lustron House was hoped to be mass-produced and was also hoped to be a house type that could aid in alleviating the post-World-War-II housing shortage that was a problem across the country. By the end of 1949, twelve Lustron homes had been shipped to Arkansas, and the Matthews House is one of four known surviving examples in the state, and one of two known to survive in Little Rock. As a rare surviving example of a Lustron House in Arkansas, the Mary H. Matthews Lustron House is being nominated to the National Register of Historic Places with **statewide significance** under **Criterion C**.

**Narrative Statement of Significance** (Provide at least **one** paragraph for each area of significance.)

### **HISTORY OF THE PROPERTY**

Like much of the country, Little Rock suffered a severe housing shortage after World War II. As Jim and Judy Lester write in their book *Greater Little Rock*, "With the victory over Germany and Japan secured, American GIs rushed home from Europe and Asia to pursue the American dream. In Little Rock, the late 1940s were marked by serious housing shortages as veterans flocked back to central Arkansas. To meet this need, developers converted woodlands in the west into tract houses and expanded areas like Cammack Village that had been built during the war."<sup>1</sup> The growth of Little Rock to the west was also the result of the increasing number and usage of automobiles. "Rush-hour traffic jams, irritating parking meters, and confusing one-way streets began to erode the glamour of shopping in the downtown area."<sup>2</sup>

To help deal with the housing shortage, several solutions were employed. In the city's older neighborhoods, many of the large old homes were divided into apartments, and the first federally-funded, low-income housing projects were also initially diverted to house war plant workers. However, once World War II was over, and construction materials became more available, small new houses could once again be built to house the influx of city residents. Although new neighborhoods were developed, the houses were also built in previously platted neighborhoods around the city that had not seen much development prior to the war, including the Cunningham's Addition to the City of Little Rock.<sup>3</sup>

The Cunningham's Addition to the City of Little Rock, where the Matthews Lustron House was built, first appears on the 1913 Sanborn maps for the city, although there are no detail sheets for

<sup>1</sup> Lester, Jim, and Judy Lester. *Greater Little Rock*. Norfolk, VA: Donning Company, Publishers, 1986, p. 200.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Roy, F. Hampton, Sr., Charles Witsell, Jr., and Cheryl Griffith Nichols. *How We Lived: Little Rock as an American City*. Little Rock: August House, 1984, p. 206.

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the area. Bounded by West 8<sup>th</sup> Street on the north, Washington Street on the east, West 12<sup>th</sup> Street on the south, and Butler Street on the west, the addition was just outside of the city limits at the time. (Washington Street was the western edge of the city limits.) Even though the neighborhood was platted in the early twentieth century, it was several decades before much development occurred in the area.<sup>4</sup>

By 1939, the first time that detailed sheets of Sanborn maps illustrate the Cunningham's Addition part of the city, there were very few houses built in the area. In addition, parts of some of the streets were unpaved. (Maryland Avenue, for example, was not paved between Van Buren and Harrison, just west of the Matthews House.) Even by 1950, the last time that Sanborn maps were done for Little Rock, there were still many vacant lots in the Cunningham's Addition. For example, the Matthews House was one of only three houses that had been built on its block. There were also totally vacant blocks to the east and west along with blocks that had had only one house built on them.<sup>5</sup>

The concentrated development of the Cunningham's Addition during and after World War II meant that it developed during the Lustron's heyday of the late 1940s. The post-World-War-II-era of the late 1940s and 1950s represented the real beginnings of the westward-expansion of the city as new suburbs and shopping centers were built, especially in the area of Hayes Street, now University Avenue. Interestingly, the other known surviving Lustron in Little Rock, located at 1302 South Tyler, is less than ½ mile from the Matthews House.

Although the Lustron Corporation's prefabricated houses came about in the late 1940s, the idea of prefabrication was nothing new at the time, having been around since at least the mid-nineteenth century. During the latter half of the 1800s, there were several companies that manufactured "portable" or "sectional" houses, mainly for shipment to California during the Gold Rush, for use during the Civil War, or for use as vacation cottages during the 1870s and 1880s. Houses illustrated in the 1862 Skillings and Flint catalogue of "Portable Sectional Houses" ranged in price from \$125 up to \$650.<sup>6</sup>

Even though the manufacture of prefabricated houses began in the mid-nineteenth century, it was apparently still uncommon by the 1880s. In the early 1880s, the editors of *The American Architect* wrote: "The most frequently repeated of all the many questions which we receive – one which we have become weary of answering – is the inquiry where the sectional or portable buildings...are to be procured. Our correspondents alone, for the last four or five years, supposing them to order one house each, would have kept a considerable establishment fully occupied, and we hope that any persons undertaking such business, for their own benefit as well as ours, will keep us informed of their whereabouts." Apparently, builders took the editors' plea seriously since the Portable and Manufacturing Co. of New York began publishing illustrated ads within a year and by 1892 the E. F. Hodgson Co. of Boston was producing sectional cottages.

<sup>4</sup> Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps for the City of Little Rock: 1913, 1939, and 1950.

<sup>5</sup> Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps for the City of Little Rock: 1913, 1939, and 1950.

<sup>6</sup> Reiff, Daniel D. *Houses from Books: Treatises, Pattern Books, and Catalogs in American Architecture, 1738-1950: A History and Guide*. University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000, p. 119.

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Although many of the companies that produced portable or sectional houses were located in the eastern United States, at least one company existed in the Midwest as well. In the mid-1860s, Col. Lyman Bridges began manufacturing houses in Chicago, and he exhibited one of his houses at the Paris Exposition Universelle in 1867. As Reiff states, "It was standard balloon-frame construction, but came as a 'complete package,' including 'the sill and everything above them,' with all 'finishing lumber dressed, ready to be fitted together' and all the components ('doors, door frames, glazed sash, steps, stairs, brackets, railings, trimmings, locks, knobs, hinges, screws, nails, [even] chimney and flues') ready for assembly, according to an 1870 catalog."<sup>7</sup>

Even though most early efforts at constructing prefabricated houses involved wood construction, a couple of efforts involved concrete. Notably, in the first decade of the 1900s Thomas Edison proposed a system for constructing a concrete house in one pour, although it ultimately proved to be impractical on a commercial scale. Another effort involving concrete was undertaken by architect Grosvenor Atterbury who had devised a system of pre-cast hollow-core concrete panels for floors, walls, and roofs. With the support of the Russell Sage Foundation, Atterbury did erect several hundred houses between 1910 and 1918 in Forest Hills, New York.<sup>8</sup>

The first efforts looking at the use of steel for prefabricated housing likely emerged in the 1920s when Walter Gropius and his colleagues at the Bauhaus in Germany built a steel house to coincide with the building of the new Bauhaus building in 1926. In the same year, Karl Kastner and Company in Leipzig, Germany, also built a steel house. Interestingly, both of the German efforts were also in response to a housing shortage that was plaguing Germany in the mid-1920s.<sup>9</sup>

Also in the 1920s some efforts were undertaken in this country, but they focused on commercial buildings and storage sheds. L. W. Ray, for example, designed and patented a portable unit that became the standard for White Castle Hamburger stands in 1928. Like the Lustron later on, Ray's design used a steel frame and porcelain-enameled steel panels that fastened to the frame to become the interior and exterior walls.<sup>10</sup>

However, it was not until the Century of Progress Exposition in 1933 that the real possibility of acceptance of prefabricated metal housing came to be. Of the 11 model houses that were constructed for the event, three were manufactured primarily from steel. The General Houses House, the Armco-Ferro Enamel House (a joint venture between the American Rolling Mill Company [ARMCO] of Middletown, Ohio, and the Ferro Enamel Corporation of Cleveland, and

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<sup>7</sup> Reiff, Daniel D. *Houses from Books: Treatises, Pattern Books, and Catalogs in American Architecture, 1738-1950: A History and Guide*. University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000, p. 119.

<sup>8</sup> Knerr, Douglas. *Suburban Steel: The Magnificent Failure of the Lustron Corporation, 1945-1951*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2004, p. 34.

<sup>9</sup> Fetters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author. *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> Fetters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author. *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, p. 7.

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the Strand-Steel House were mostly manufactured from steel while the House of Tomorrow used a light steel frame that was covered on the ground floor with a molded veneer of plastic.<sup>11</sup>

However, Lustron's efforts represented one of the first serious attempts to use steel for prefabricated residential construction, and the post-World War II era was the perfect time to try the concept. Lustron was the brainchild of Carl Strandlund who had been born in Sweden in 1888 and was the son and grandson of engineers. Strandlund graduated from Moline (Illinois) High School and took correspondence courses to become a graduate engineer. Strandlund worked for several farm implement companies, including John Deere, Minneapolis Moline, and the Oliver Farm Machinery Company, and would eventually get 150 patents related to improving farm implements. (His father had 300 patents for farm implements and improvements as well.)<sup>12</sup>

At Oliver, Strandlund became the director of engineering and development before being promoted to the manager and works coordinator for the company's four manufacturing plants. After leaving Oliver, Strandlund worked for Chicago Steel Foundry and B.F. Goodrich in Akron, Ohio, before joining Chicago Vitreous Enamel Products Company in April 1942 as a works manager at their Cicero, Illinois, plant.<sup>13</sup>

The Chicago Vitreous Products Company had been founded in 1919 by brothers William and Emanuel Hogenson. The company produced steel enamelware for companies that manufactured household enameled appliances such as stoves, washing machines, and refrigerators. The company later developed a high-grade steel enamel that was used for architectural panels including storefronts and interior walls, which were developed under the Porcelain Products Company name. The Porcelain Products Company was formed in 1932, and, although it had been in use since August 24, 1936, they trademarked the name "Lustron" on October 19, 1937.<sup>14</sup> The word "Lustron," was a variation of Lusterlite and a contraction of the procedure of putting "luster on" steel through the enameling process.<sup>15</sup>

The efforts to get the Lustron Corporation off the ground began in 1946 when engineer and inventor Carl Strandlund met in Washington, DC, with Wilson Wyatt of the Veterans Emergency Housing Program and who was also the Expediter of the National Housing Agency. Strandlund was seeking release of some of the government's hoarded steel so that his company could resume production of enameled steel service stations and hamburger stands.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Fetters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author. *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> Fetters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author. *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, p. 10.

<sup>13</sup> Fetters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author. *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, pp. 10-11.

<sup>14</sup> Fetters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author. *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, p. 11.

<sup>15</sup> Knerr, Douglas. *Suburban Steel: The Magnificent Failure of the Lustron Corporation, 1945-1951*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2004, p. 77.

<sup>16</sup> Fetters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author. *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, p. 3.

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Although Wyatt and the government were not willing to release steel for the construction of hamburger stands and service stations, especially given the post-war housing shortage, they were willing to release an unlimited supply of steel for housing. Although Strandlund's hopes were probably somewhat dashed, he did see a tremendous opportunity in the use of steel for housing. In fact, he had designs for the Lustron with him.<sup>17</sup>

The prototype Lustron house was manufactured using the tooling that Chicago Vitreous had retained from before World War II, and it was named the "Esquire." Once the idea for the plan of the Lustron houses was developed Strandlund commissioned two architects who had previously done work for Chicago Vitreous to design the prototype house. Morris H. Beckman and Roy Burton Blass were familiar with the company's capabilities and were well-suited for the task. Beckman had graduated from MIT in 1938, and had risen quickly to become a chief draftsman at the firm of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill (SOM). In 1945, Beckman left SOM and established the firm of Beckman and Blass in Wilmette, Illinois, with Blass as his partner.<sup>18</sup>

The design that Beckman and Blass came up with reflected the strong consumer desire for a flexible interior with open spaces and multipurpose rooms. They chose the ranch style for the Lustron for several reasons. First, it was a simple design that could be adapted to a wide variety of locations and lot characteristics. Second, it gave the house a broad potential market, and since it was a design that many were familiar with, it was hoped that this would outweigh any potential negativity associated with the novelty of the steel construction. The ranch style also "represented modularity and modernity, a reduction of housing to its most essential features without sacrificing livability."<sup>19</sup>

Although the panels for the house were done by Chicago Vitreous initially, the frame for the prototype was done by Macomber Steel in Canton, Ohio, following the design of Beckman and Blass. Once the frame was completed, it was shipped to the site in South Hinsdale, Illinois, where the prototype would be constructed. In addition, while the frame was being manufactured, the engineers were looking for a suitable material to be used to seal the gaps between the steel panels. After testing several materials, they settled on polyvinyl chloride, which is used today for bottle cap gaskets for baby food, pickles, and jelly, among other food products.<sup>20</sup>

The prototype house was erected on the grounds of the Hinsdale Nursery, a commercial supplier of trees, shrubs, and plants for private and commercial use, at 7210 South Madison Street. The company had a large formal garden near the nursery's entrance and the house was built in the middle of it. Like the eventual production models, the Esquire prototype used porcelain-enameled steel for the walls, roof, gutters, and downspouts. However, some of the interior

<sup>17</sup> Fetters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author. *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, pp. 4-5.

<sup>18</sup> Knerr, Douglas. *Suburban Steel: The Magnificent Failure of the Lustron Corporation, 1945-1951*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2004, p. 78.

<sup>19</sup> Knerr, Douglas. *Suburban Steel: The Magnificent Failure of the Lustron Corporation, 1945-1951*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2004, p. 78.

<sup>20</sup> Fetters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author. *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, p. 18.

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partitions were constructed out of wood and plywood, although they would eventually use the porcelain-enameled steel like the rest of the house. Although a few minor changes were undertaken during construction, the finished house was close to Beckman and Blass' original design.<sup>21</sup>

Visitors who toured the prototype house in Hinsdale were given a promotional brochure with a floor plan of the house. Some of the specifications for the house were that

...the house was designed to be built on a concrete slab, had unitized structural steel support members that formed the wall sections, steel trusses supporting the roof, 1½ inches of fiberglass insulation behind the exterior wall panels, and four inches of the same material above the false ceiling over the ceiling panels. Radiant heat was supplied to the structure through the ceiling panels from a Williams Oil-O-Matic furnace, although coal or natural gas furnaces could be installed depending on the owner's preference and local availability.<sup>22</sup>

Once the feasibility of constructing the house was shown, it became necessary to find a factory for production of the final design. Wilson Wyatt contacted the War Assets Administration (WAA) and told the WAA to transfer the Dodge-Chrysler plant in Chicago, which had been converted to an aircraft engine plant to Lustron. The plant, which contained 840 acres under one roof, was ideal for Lustron's needs. However, the plant had already been promised to Preston Tucker for production of his Tucker Torpedo automobile. Although Wyatt tried to find a way for Tucker and Lustron to share the factory, which Strandlund was agreeable to doing, Tucker would not even consider it.<sup>23</sup>

However, a new housing expediter, Frank R. Creedon, who had taken Wyatt's place worked with the WAA and was finally able to offer Strandlund the choice of two plants for the manufacture of Lustron houses. Two Curtiss-Wright plants in Ohio, one in Columbus and one in Cincinnati were available. Strandlund chose the Columbus plant and signed a lease for \$428,000 a year.<sup>24</sup>

The factory was located at 4200 East 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue and consisted of two buildings that covered 107 acres with more than one million square feet of space. One of the buildings was 1,400 feet long,

<sup>21</sup> Fetters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author. *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, pp. 18, 20.

<sup>22</sup> Fetters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author. *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, pp. 20-21. The prototype house remained in use until its demolition in 1989.

<sup>23</sup> Fetters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author. *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, p. 31-32.

<sup>24</sup> Fetters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author. *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, p. 34.

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340 feet wide, and had a working height of 35 feet. By April 1948, Lustron had hired 500 people for the plant and had hoped to have 7,000 on the payroll by September.<sup>25</sup>

At the same time that Lustron was seeking a factory for home production, they were also seeking funding to fund the corporation. However, on November 2, 1946, the RFC turned down Wyatt's request for \$32 million since most companies who were seeking funding from the RFC were not putting in enough capital of their own. As RFC chairman of the board Charles B. Henderson wrote on October 31, 1946, "The Lustron application provided that, in relation to total borrowings of \$52 million, the owners of the business would only contribute \$36,000 or 7/100 of one percent."<sup>26</sup>

At this point Lustron was still part of Chicago Vit and Porcelain Products, which meant that they were partially liable for any loan funds that Lustron received. Since Porcelain Products had become inactive and Chicago Vit declined loan funds, it paved the way for Strandlund to set up a totally new "Lustron Corporation" on October 31, 1947. As Fetters and Kohler write:

On the same day, October 31, Strandlund resigned from Chicago Vitreous Enamel Products and at the same time purchased the 'Lustron' trademark, the machinery required to produce the pilot homes, and all interests that the company had in the Lustron house, using his substantial holding of Chicago Vit stock in a trade.<sup>27</sup>

At the same time that the company was organized, a board of directors was put in place. The board of directors for the Lustron Corporation had members from many different backgrounds, including several members that represented some of Lustron's suppliers. Members included Raymond Hurley, vice chairman of the Thor Corporation, the manufacturer of Lustron's dishwasher/washing machine unit; Louis Leverone, president of the Automatic Canteen Company, a supplier of kitchen and bathroom components; George Delp, president of the New Holland Machine Company, a manufacturer of Lustron's enameling machinery; and Paul O. Buckley, an officer of the Federal Machine and Welder Company, a supplier of production equipment for steel processing. Directors inside the company included Strandlund, Russell G. Davis, who was executive vice president, and Fred M. Lowum, also a vice president and treasurer.<sup>28</sup>

The upper management at Lustron, in addition to their wide-ranging backgrounds, also had wide-ranging salaries. Strandlund's salary was \$50,000 (which was a 50% reduction from his salary

<sup>25</sup> Fetters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author. *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, p. 55.

<sup>26</sup> Fetters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author. *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, p. 31.

<sup>27</sup> Fetters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author. *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, p. 37.

<sup>28</sup> Knerr, Douglas. *Suburban Steel: The Magnificent Failure of the Lustron Corporation, 1945-1951*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2004, p. 99.

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as president of Chicago Vitreous) to the junior officers' salaries, which were \$12,500. Almost all of the management took pay cuts to join Lustron. "Of the twenty-three top executives, three had worked at Chicago Vitreous, fourteen had held line management positions at manufacturing firms, two had worked in the publishing industry, and four had joined Lustron from federal agencies."<sup>29</sup>

The Lustron's sales force, which consisted of 30 people, had generated a backlog of almost 6,000 orders by mid-January 1948, and the staff of Lustron felt that full production, which they believed would be about 3,700 houses a month, would come to fruition by the end of 1948. However, it would ultimately be 19 months and six loans of \$37.5 million from the RFC before the retooling of the former aircraft factory would be complete.<sup>30</sup>

To help spread the news about Lustron homes, model homes were erected in various cities around the country. The first model home went on display in New York City in April 1948. Erected on the northeast corner of 52<sup>nd</sup> Street and the Avenue of the Americas in Manhattan, by April 14 approximately 31,000 people had toured the home. Many visitors made out checks on the spot to order a home, but Lustron refused them all since they were still months away from production. The other first model homes were erected in Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Washington, DC; Chicago, Illinois; Detroit, Michigan; St. Louis, Missouri; and Indianapolis, Indiana, among other locations.<sup>31</sup>

By late 1948, Strandlund claimed that Lustron had 20,000 "firm" orders and he announced that the production goals for 1949 were 45,000 houses. The first home design offered by Lustron was designated the "Westchester," which was similar in design to the "Esquire" prototype designed by Blass and Beckman. The name "Westchester" referred to the upscale New York county and was intended to associate the house with established and desirable suburban communities.<sup>32</sup>

Lustron saw the Westchester model as just the beginning. Lustron "planned to soon be able to build a three-bedroom house with an attached garage (which did go on the market in late 1949), a four-bedroom house, and even apartments. It also planned to design and produce complete bathrooms for farmers for about \$500 that would be sold through Sears, Roebuck & Company."<sup>33</sup>

The Westchester had many interesting features, including a combination clothes and dishwasher in the kitchen. The Thor appliance was part of the Westchester Deluxe package that also

<sup>29</sup> Knerr, Douglas. *Suburban Steel: The Magnificent Failure of the Lustron Corporation, 1945-1951*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2004, p. 100.

<sup>30</sup> Fetters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author. *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, p. 41.

<sup>31</sup> Fetters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author. *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, p. 47 and 49.

<sup>32</sup> Knerr, Douglas. *Suburban Steel: The Magnificent Failure of the Lustron Corporation, 1945-1951*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2004, p. 125.

<sup>33</sup> Fetters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author. *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, p. 45.

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included a bedroom vanity and a pass-through divider between the kitchen and dining room. The bathroom featured all of the necessary amenities including a bathtub, toilet, and sink in addition to an illuminated medicine cabinet with mirror, a towel bar, robe hook, combination soap dish and grab bar over the tub, toilet paper holder, drinking glass holder, and a curtain rod in the shower. The two-bedroom Westchester Deluxe model ultimately became Lustron's best seller.<sup>34</sup>

At the same time that the model home opened in New York City, Lustron also began a national advertising campaign in *Life* magazine, which expanded to other publications later. The ad in the April 19<sup>th</sup> issue of the magazine touted Lustron as "The House America Has Been Waiting For," and a "new standard of Living." The ad also featured a coupon that readers could submit for more information on the Lustron. More than 150,000 inquiries were received by Lustron in response to the ad in *Life* magazine alone, with about 50,000 inquiries received from the ad in other sources.<sup>35</sup>

Lustron's concerns with negative backlash from the public was also addressed in some of their advertisements. The advertisements compiled frequently-asked questions from letters that people had sent to the company. The approach was best illustrated by answers to the following questions:

“Q: What about lightning?

A: The house itself is a self-contained lightning rod.

Q: Can I have any other floor plan or room arrangement?

A: Not yet.

Q: How do I hang pictures?

A: By using self-adhesive hooking pads supplied by Lustron.

Q: Can I have a basement?

A: No, basements are unnecessary and outmoded for modern life – pioneers needed them for food storage, you have a convenient ground-floor utility room.

Q: Can the house be taken down and moved?

A: No, it is not demountable or portable. If you move to another location, you will want to sell and buy another Lustron Home.”<sup>36</sup>

However, criticism did come about, although little of it was from homeowners. During Senate hearings on Lustron, Senator J. William Fulbright of Arkansas stated: “I have only seen one of them, but it sort of reminds you of a bathtub.” Reconstruction Finance Corporation director Harvey J. Gunderson, on the other hand, said that Lustrons looked “a little like hotdog stands.”<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Fetters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author. *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, pp. 70-71.

<sup>35</sup> Fetters, Thomas T. and Vincent Kohler, contributing author. *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002, p. 48.

<sup>36</sup> Knerr, Douglas. *Suburban Steel: The Magnificent Failure of the Lustron Corporation, 1945-1951*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2004, p. 112.

<sup>37</sup> Knerr, Douglas. *Suburban Steel: The Magnificent Failure of the Lustron Corporation, 1945-1951*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2004, p. 145.