



# history

**O** UNIVERSITY OF OREGON  
PORTLAND

## the white stag block

The University of Oregon in Portland is housed in a complex of buildings called the White Stag Block that merges the Bickel Block building, constructed in 1883, the Skidmore Block building, constructed in 1889, and the White Stag building (also known as the Hirsch-Weis building), constructed in 1907. These three buildings, along with the Blagen Block building, cover a Portland city block. The first businesses in these buildings read like a cross-section of Portland's history. These buildings once housed a logging machinery company, a tent and outdoor supply factory, and even a china importer. Now, the historic White Stag, Skidmore, and Bickel buildings have been connected through a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED™) renovation process involving the University of Oregon in Portland, with Venerable Group, Inc., United Fund Advisors and others.

### Bickel Block Building

Fredrick Bickel was a Portland candy entrepreneur who used the success of his confectionary to launch a career in real estate development. This building, designed in 1883, was the first of many gothic buildings by Oregon architect, Justus Krumbein. In this period, cast iron was the new building material both for its ornamentation and its assumed resistance to fire in industrial buildings. New York City, San Francisco and other major cities were also building cast-iron façades at this time.

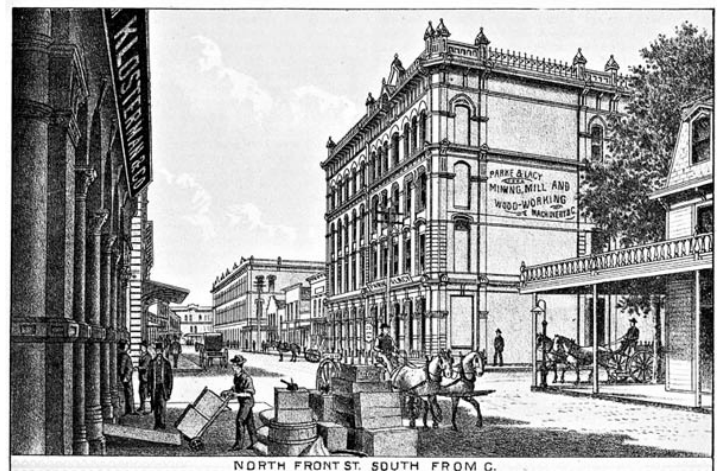
The Bickel Block building originally housed the Parke and Lacey Machinery Company, which made engines and heavy machinery for the logging industry. It was later purchased, in 1950, by the Fraser Paper Company. In 1958, the owner at the time had a masonry product called "Wonderstone" installed at the storefront level, concealing the beautiful and ornate cast-iron columns and wood storefront doors. In order to fully encapsulate the pre-existing façade without overstepping the property line, many of the cast-iron pieces were smashed off so that the bricks

could lie flush. In 1972, a subsequent owner set fire to the building in order to collect on his insurance policy. During the renovation process, the masonry wall was removed to reveal damaged cast-iron ornamentation and charred wooden doors.

There is a popular myth about 'Shanghai tunnels' that run underneath Portland's China Town and Old Town. The legend holds that in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, bars in the neighborhoods had trap doors leading to the tunnels that would be used to capture, or 'shanghai', drunken men who would become slaves on ships leaving Portland for voyages at sea. Others claim that these tunnels were simply used to transport goods back and forth between the ships and the warehouses along the river. Some believe that remnants of these tunnels about the White Stag Block's river-facing basement, and although now sealed off, pass beneath Naito Parkway and Governor Tom McCall Waterfront Park to the water's edge. However, there is no hard evidence proving that this is true.

### Skidmore Block Building

The façade of the Skidmore Block building is of Italianate-style cast iron. The Skidmore building was completed in 1889 for Stephen Skidmore's business partner and brother-in-law, Charles E. Sitton, who



had inherited the Skidmore Block parcel upon Skidmore's 1882 death. In 1926, the south façade was removed and rebuilt at an angle to make room for the construction of the Burnside Bridge, which now abuts the building. Like the Bickel, the Skidmore was built with an ornate cast-iron façade.

## White Stag Building

The White Stag building's first occupants were Max and Leopold Hirsh of the Willamette Tent and Awning Company. They used the building as their manufacturing and warehouse space. As was the case with the Skidmore, the south façade of the White Stag was also removed to make way for the construction of the Burnside Bridge. Harold Hirsh opened White Stag Sporting Goods in the building in 1931. In 1940, the roof space was rented to the White Satin Sugar Company for the placement of a sign promoting that company's name. But, in 1959, the sign was changed to read 'White Stag' to reflect Hirsch-Weis' new status as a division of White Stag. The sign was re-worded again in 1997 to read 'Made in Oregon' under the patronage of the Made in Oregon Company, a retail chain of Oregon foods and crafts. The new text did not violate historic preservation codes both because it was outside the protected timeframe and because it was argued that the text itself was separate from the style and is entitled to First Amendment liberties.

The story of the White Stag is merged with that of Hide Naito, who immigrated to Los Angeles from Japan in 1917. Four years later, Naito opened a Portland import business which became the Norcrest China Company. By 1972, Norcrest China had moved into the White Stag building.

The Naito family businesses, run by sons Sam and Bill Naito, grew to managing 1.8 million square feet of central Portland real estate by 2004 and the chain of Made in Oregon stores. Bill Naito, for whom Front Avenue was renamed, kept a small office and living space in the building until his 1996 death. Norcrest China closed in 2004. University of Oregon President David Frohnmyer awarded Sam Naito, among others, an honorary degree in 2008 in an attempt to redress the 1942 expulsion of 20 Japanese Americans from the University.

The White Stag building was purchased in 2006 by White Stag Block, LLC, managed by Venerable Group, Inc. The University of Oregon has signed an eighteen-year lease, with an option to purchase the building. With approximately 66,000 square feet of available space, the new facility will incorporate the University Oregon in Portland's academic programs and will enable the University to host lectures, exhibits, and other public events.

~ Zach Rose, Diana Fischetti

Photos: Graham Halberg, Venerable Properties, Inc., James Descoteaux, V.P. Inc. Oregon Historical Society, G.H.

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