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New life for old factories in Orange

Artist lofts planned for Stetson complex

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STAR-LEDGER STAFF

The boarded-up factories where John B. Stetson and his family built a thriving hat manufacturing business in Orange's Valley section may be transformed into lofts and retail space for artists.

That's the goal for the Stetson family's long-abandoned No Name Hat Factory complex, off Mitchell and South Jefferson streets. It is at the northern end of what used to be Orange's hat manufacturing district.

The Orange City Council recently made a deal with developers to breathe new residential and retail life into that site as well as into two adjacent properties: the onetime Monroe Calculating Co. and the Harvard Press building.

The entire redevelopment project is being dubbed Jefferson Art Walk and is part of a larger Central Valley Redevelopment Plan.

The project targets a five-block stretch of Jefferson Avenue between Central Avenue and Nassau Street, near the Highland Avenue train station.

The city council on Aug. 2 assigned that major redevelopment task to Harvard Development Associates Urban Renewal LLC.

Harvard is a partnership among the nonprofit Housing and Neighborhood Development Services Inc. (HANDS) of Orange; the Alpert Group LLC, of Fort Lee; and Ironstate Holdings LLC, a division of the Applied Development Co., of Hoboken.

"We're talking about a publicprivate investment in excess of \$100 million," Joseph Alpert, head of the Alpert Group, said.

The Jefferson Art Walk project "will firmly establish the Valley Arts District, and it will fuel the renaissance of all of Orange," Patrick Morrissy, the executive director of HANDS, said.

The initial redevelopment plan calls for the creation of 100 residential and retail spaces where artists will live and work, Morrissy said.

"There will be artist live-work lofts, artist retail spaces, artist studios, and art program spaces," Morrissy said. "The project will include a new pedestrian entrance to the Valley, along the east branch of the Rahway River, and another 350 condominium units, in either the old industrial buildings, or new buildings."

City council support for the Jefferson Art Walk comes on the heels of a previously approved redevelopment effort at the southern end of the Valley.

The same group of developers is finalizing plans on a \$9 million redevelopment effort that involves transforming the former F. Berg & Co. hat factory complex into the Valley Renaissance Center.

The Berg site, once the largest hat-making business of the 33 hat manufacturers that dominated the Valley area between the mid-1880s and early 1900s, is on South Jefferson Street, between Nassau and Forest streets.

"We've already been given state Department of Environmental Protection clearance for residential use," Morrissy said. "We are just awaiting final approval from the DEP concerning stream encroachment concerns."

As soon as DEP approves development plans required to ensure all current and future building properties are properly water-proofed, municipal building permits will be sought to transform 70,000 square feet of space into market-rate condominiums, subsidized loft studios, art galleries, and ground-level retail space, Morrissy said.

Right now, "there probably will be construction at the Berg factory within the next six months," Alpert predicted. "And within the next year, there should be (the) start of redevelopment at the Harvard Printing site, with the remainder to come thereafter."

There is no estimated time frame to begin residential and retail transformation work on the Monroe Calculating buildings, Alpert said.

It was John B. Stetson's father, Stephen Stetson, who began a hat manufacturing career, first in East Orange's downtown Brick Church section, then Orange, when he moved his operation to the Valley neighborhood.

It was in the Valley area that Stephen Stetson and his sons, including John B. Stetson, born in 1830, built the No Name plant.

Since the family never could decide on what to name the business, they simply agreed on No Name.

John B. Stetson, who suffered from tuberculosis, eventually left the family business in Orange, spent time exploring the Midwest, then headed back to Philadelphia, where, in 1865, he started his own hat manufacturing business.

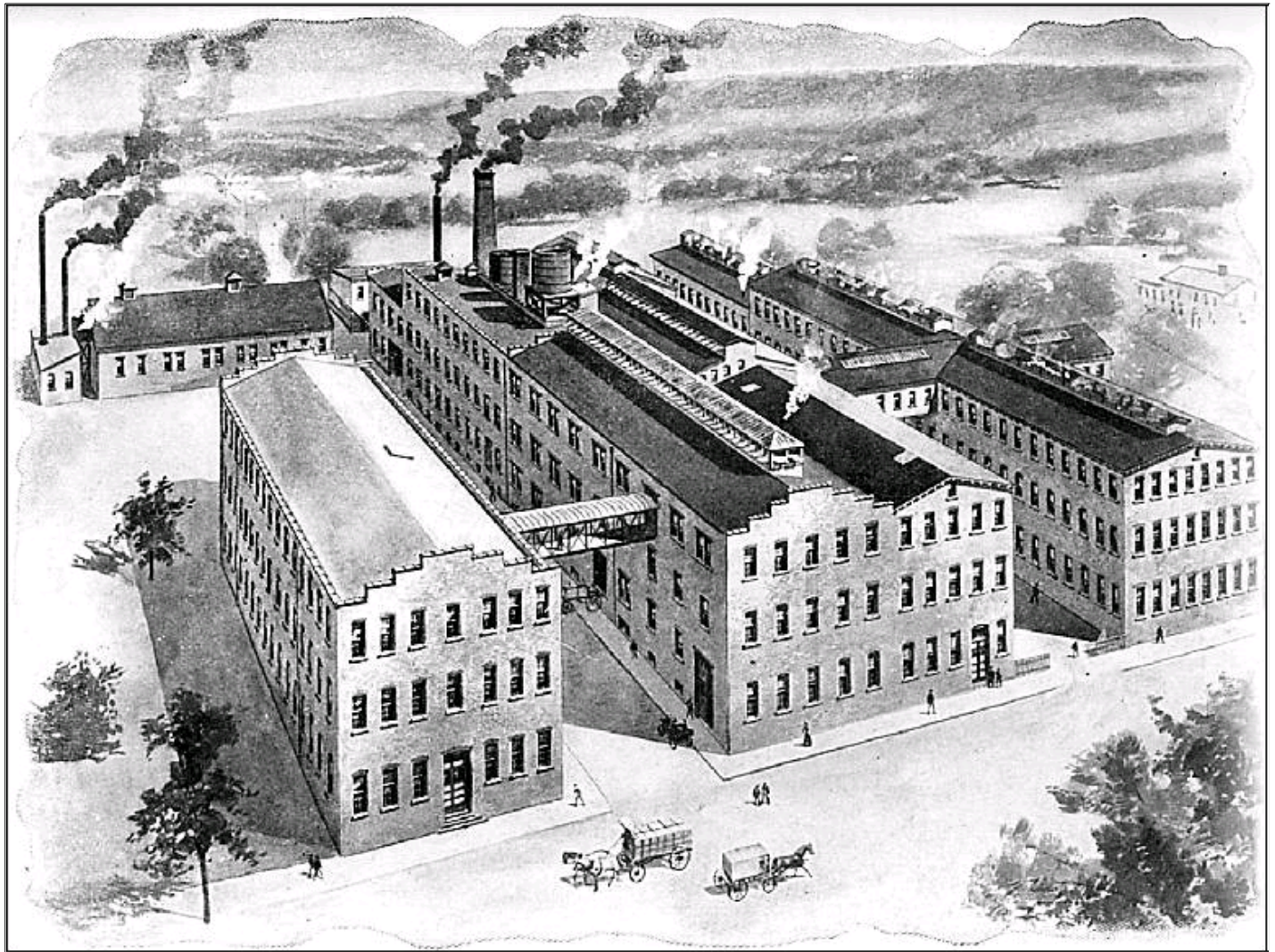
It was in Philadelphia, not Orange, that John B. Stetson trademarked the Stetson name and built his own hat manufacturing empire under his own name.

Although John B. Stetson once served as president of No Name and held shares in the family business, the John B. Stetson Co. Ltd. of Philadelphia had no connection to No Name.

No Name, once Orange's third largest hat manufacturing concern, went out of business in 1926.

One of John B. Stetson's grandnephews, Stephen L. Stetson, in January 1934 was sued by the John B. Stetson Co. for trademark infringement.

That happened after he decided to put his name, Stephen L. Stetson, on his manufactured hats. Stephen L. Stetson ultimately was ordered to stop using the family name on his hats.



The Orange City Council has struck a deal with developers to transform the old No Name Hat Factory complex, pictured in drawing above, into artists lofts and retail space.