

Register of Old Buildings  
Macon County Historical Coordinating Council

Address: 740 E. North St. (Formerly Decatur Coffin Company)

Date of original construction: 1872.

Name of original owner: T. T. Roberts.

History: See attached article.

Present owner: Alfred (Sol) Tick.

740 East North



Photos, Margaret M. Meyer, 1974

The implements manufactured by the firm are of the newest and most approved pattern and are favorably known on the market throughout the farming districts.

In addition to manufacturing the firm sells buggies and wagons in Illinois.

**Decatur Coffin Co.** A distinctively Decatur enterprise that has always had the reputation of being extremely successful and has gone on from year to year extending its territory and adding to the means of its owners is the Decatur Coffin Co. Established in 1872, it has been conducted with perhaps more uniform success under substantially the same management longer than any other manufacturing establishment in the city.

With the changes that have come in the industrial activities of the country, it has kept pace with the times and while not departing from the conservative course that

speaks for the discernment and ability of the management.

The Decatur Coffin Co. manufactures burial caskets and burial robes and wholesales undertakers' supplies. Its territory is the United States and its salesmen visit regularly and get good orders in all the principal cities of the country. In burial garments it is recognized by the trade as the leader and the most important establishment of the kind in the country. The company in this line a few years ago made some departures that resulted in entirely changing the material and manner of making burial garments and gave the company the place it now holds at the very head of the trade of the country. Other departments have been kept up in the same way.

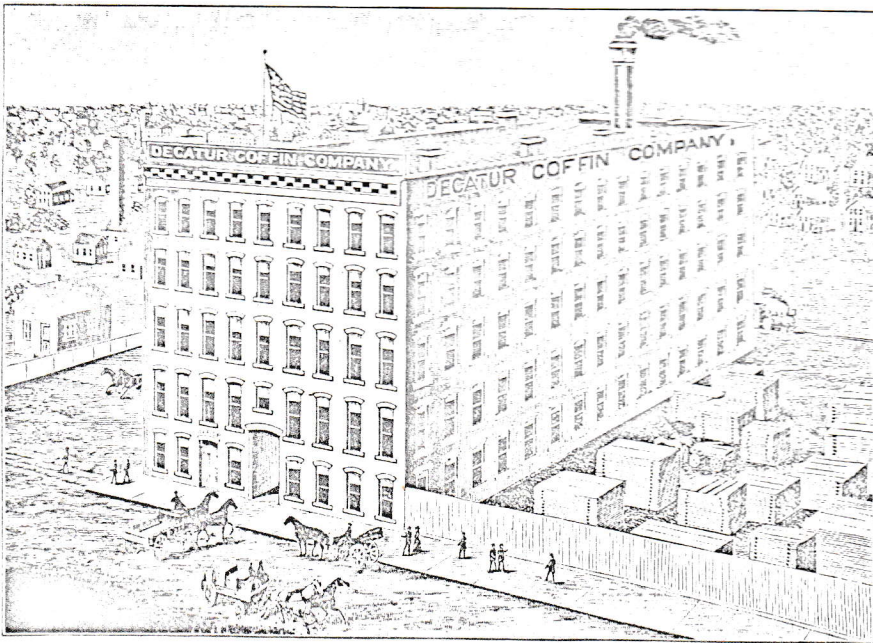
The company has salesmen on the road, covering all the commercial centers of the country. It employs a large number of mechanics in the casket department, also a

large number of experienced dressmakers in its dry goods department. It has a complete plant for its purpose at the corner of North and Morgan streets.

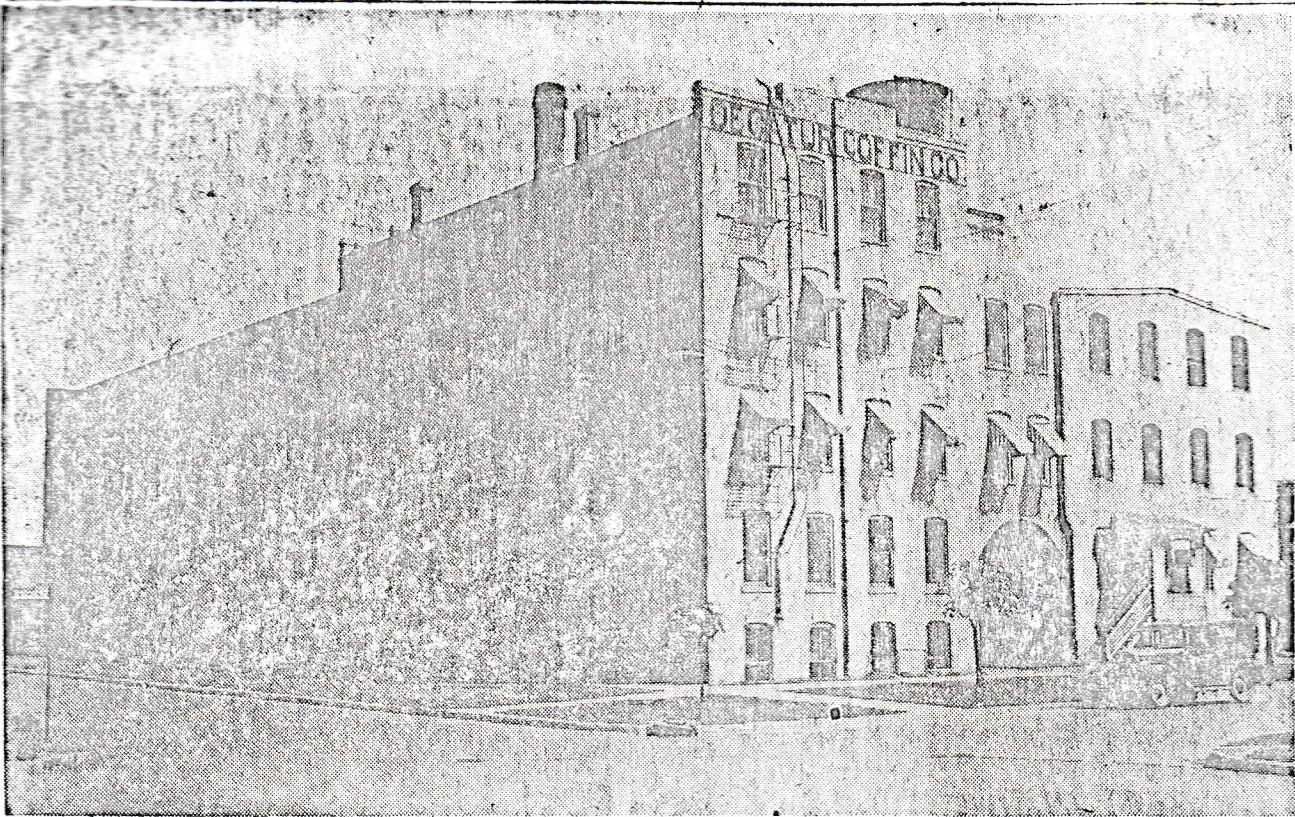
### Light, Heat Power

The Decatur Gas and Electric Co. furnishes the electric and gas light, electric power and fuel gas for the citizens of Decatur.

The original plant was installed in 1868. The company was formerly the Decatur Gas, Light and Coke Co., and later the Decatur Light, Heat and Power Co. When the plant was bought



assisted in its early success has adopted new ideas as fast as seemed wise. Its present importance, standing as it does as one of the first enterprises of its kind in the country,



The Decatur Coffin Company, although successful, was plagued by fires.

**Decatur Diary**

# Changing Tastes, War Killed Coffin Company

By Arlette Fontaine

Of the Herald and Review

The Decatur Coffin Company died in 1943, laid low by the demands of the war and the supplanting of wooden caskets by those of metal.

In its beginnings, however, the firm thrived, despite a depression. T. T. Roberts and a Mr. Lytle set up the company in 1872.

In 1873, the firm was incorporated under the ownership of Roberts and O. Z. Greene. Others entered the partnership, with proprietorship passing to heirs as owners died.

In its first years, most of the company's competition came from undertakers, who made their own coffins as needed. It was then considered a sacrilege of sorts to bury a friend in a factory-made coffin.

But attitudes changed, and business was so good the firm built, in 1913, an addition that doubled capacity.

The first business in Decatur to install an automatic sprinkler system and to pay all the premiums for group employe insurance, the company was nevertheless plagued by fires throughout its history.

**Building Destroyed**

The first fire, in 1878, destroyed the main building at North and Morgan streets. A second, three years later, did little damage.

In 1904, a blaze which started in a toolroom where a workman had been annealing steel caused \$1,500 to \$2,500 damage.

The worst blaze, in 1907, caused up to \$25,000 damage and injured two firemen, who fell, along with the burning floor and roof, from the fourth story to the ground. Buried under tons of lumber and machinery, they escaped with broken bones and bruises.

The last fire, in 1941, began in a lumber drying kiln and did little damage.

The kiln dried the lumber of sap so the caskets would not stretch or shrink at the un-

dertaker's. The parts of the caskets were glued together so strongly that the wood would crack before the glue would give way.

Despite its name, the company had quit making coffins in the early part of the century and concentrated on caskets. A coffin tapers at the head and foot from the point where elbows rest. A casket has the same width at both ends.

**Casket Types**

Three classes of caskets were manufactured: wood covered with wool, cotton or silk; varnished maple, oak, walnut, mahogany or cypress; and metal of iron, steel, bronze, copper and zinc.

Tailors were employed to make suits and dresses. Suits came in greys or blues, and the dresses of orchid, pink, blue or white had imported lace.

The firm, which employed 100, sold products nationally.

In 1943 the Decatur Coffin Co. closed. Stockholders voted to liquidate, explaining the war had caused limitations.

Earl Heaton, regional director of United Mine Workers of America, AF of L, said Local 783 protested the action of the War Production Board, which had not granted priorities to the coffin industry.

"We believe," he said, "that the government and the public owe a moral obligation to the dead and should demand that a decent burial is received for everyone."

Shortly before the company closed in July, the Walrus Manufacturing Co., which specialized in cabinet and metal work, announced it would make caskets. It purchased much of the equipment and inventory of the old firm.

According to a newspaper clipping, the main building of the defunct firm was purchased by Sol Tick of the "Sol Tick junk business." A smaller building to the south had already been sold to Oakes Machinery Co.