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Each home produced by Lustron required an astronomical amount of material. For example, 12.5 tons of steel and one ton of enamel were required. Over 1,000 pieces had to have enamel applied and over 200 of the pieces required a different shape or color. Each Lustron house had 7,000 square feet of surface that required enameling.<sup>38</sup>

The amount of material that would potentially be needed, especially when Lustron reached full production, was also expressed in Douglas Knerr's book *Suburban Steel: The Magnificent Failure of the Lustron Corporation, 1945-1951*. Knerr wrote:

A comparison of Lustron's raw material requirements with the entire U.S. enameling industry provides a startling insight into the scope of operations. Based on a projected production of 100 houses per day, Lustron would consume approximately 25 percent of the frit and approximately 75 percent of the coloring oxides produced in the nation. Each day, the plant would enamel over 100,000 individual pieces in over 200 shapes and colors – by far the largest enameling operation in the world. Ceramics industry publications reflected both elation and trepidation at Lustron's potential impact.<sup>39</sup>

Lustron produced its first run of porcelain-enameled steel on August 31, 1948. Since Strandlund was an avid cigar smoker, he immediately ordered some of the steel made into souvenir ashtrays that were decorated with his signature.<sup>40</sup> Finally, though, after years of preparation, the first house for public sale left the Lustron factory in early January 1949 bound for Webster Groves, a western suburb of St. Louis. The event occurred much later than had been hoped. It had been over three years since the end of World War II in 1945 and most of America's soldiers had returned to the U.S. and set up homes in the meantime.<sup>41</sup> The fact that production of Lustrons occurred after the majority of the housing crisis had been solved as well as the high cost were two of the biggest problems that Lustron had to overcome, according to *Architectural Forum*.<sup>42</sup>

One of the largest obstacles in the process of constructing and erecting the Lustron house was shipping the house to the building site. The company's engineers, led by Dick Reedy, came up with a solution of loading all of the components onto a single flat-bed trailer where the walls and roof trusses formed the outer perimeter of the trailer while the other components were loaded in the center. Boxes on the floor of the trailer held the nuts and bolts and the tools necessary to assemble the house. The trailers, which were brightly painted blue and yellow with the Lustron

<sup>38</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. 57 and 62.

<sup>39</sup> Knerr, Douglas. *Suburban Steel: The Magnificent Failure of the Lustron Corporation, 1945-1951*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2004, p. 118.

<sup>40</sup> Knerr, Douglas. *Suburban Steel: The Magnificent Failure of the Lustron Corporation, 1945-1951*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2004, p. 124.

<sup>41</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. 53.

<sup>42</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. 82.

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logos, also acted as rolling advertisements for the house, and they could also serve the purpose of returning to the factory with raw materials. Reedy eventually negotiated with a Chicago-based leasing company to provide 400 trucks and 800 trailers built by Freuhauf Trailer Company to Reedy's specifications.<sup>43</sup>

The price that a purchaser paid for the Lustron depended on the company's price structure, a complex formula that was based on geographic zones. However, this allowed for the covering of transportation costs to get the house to the site. Obviously those zones closest to the factory in Columbus were the cheapest while the homes sent to southwest Texas, the westernmost point covered by Lustron in the continental U.S., were the most expensive. Base prices ranged from a low of \$4,110 for the basic two-bedroom Newport Model 023 delivered in Zone 1 to \$7,737 for the top of the line three-bedroom Westchester Deluxe delivered in Zone 48 in Texas. Of course, local conditions and costs for the foundation, erection fees, and plumbing and electrical costs, plus the lot, could raise the price significantly more.<sup>44</sup>

Arkansas was covered by Lustron's Zones 17-27, which meant that prices varied from \$4,590 for a Newport Model 023 up to \$7,212 for a three-bedroom Westchester Deluxe, a significant amount of money during the 1940s. As Knerr writes in his book, "Since the average annual income of veterans in 1946 was approximately \$2,500, the 'magic number' for the industry was \$5,000. 'What this country really needs is a good \$5,000 house,' Strandlund asserted, wryly echoing former U.S. Vice President Thomas Marshall's famous quote about the country needing a good five-cent cigar."<sup>45</sup>

Once the Lustron house was finally shipped to the site, the troubles associated with constructing the house may not have ended, depending on the local building codes. In Chicago, for example, codes required plastered walls and ceilings for houses, which disqualified the Lustron. Connecticut codes required basements while the copper plumbing used in the Lustron was banned by many building codes, including those of Atlanta. Even Lustron's home town of Columbus required brick or stone chimneys, which caused problems initially. However, even if things were fine with the local building codes, some local FHA requirements caused troubles, since they varied from state to state. In Indiana, for example, the FHA required an overhead light in the bathroom, while it was not a requirement in Ohio. In Tennessee, the FHA required a door between the kitchen and the dining room, which the Lustron's open plan did not have.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Knerr, Douglas. *Suburban Steel: The Magnificent Failure of the Lustron Corporation, 1945-1951*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2004, pp. 115-116.

<sup>44</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. 74-75. Although Texas was the furthest west of the official Lustron zones, at least three Lustron homes were constructed on Fairway Drive in Los Alamos, New Mexico. However, it is possible that these were erected by the U.S. Government as part of the Manhattan Project.

<sup>45</sup> Knerr, Douglas. *Suburban Steel: The Magnificent Failure of the Lustron Corporation, 1945-1951*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2004, p. 94, and 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. 151-152.

<sup>46</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. 76-77.

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Volume production of Lustron houses finally began on February 25, 1949, with a reported 25 houses being produced daily. (It was later found out that the actual number of houses being produced a day was 15.) However, former congressional Representative Frank L. "Sunny" Sundstrom of New Jersey, who was now working as Lustron's vice president of distribution, sales, and servicing that the company could break even if it produced at least 35 houses a day. (Although 250 houses had been produced by this time, they were almost exclusively for testing or demonstration purposes.)<sup>47</sup>

Production continued to climb after the beginning of volume production, but it never reached the hoped for levels that Lustron wanted. On July 7, 1949, 24 houses were shipped from the factory, which was the largest single day's shipment up to that time. The houses went to fourteen different states, with at least one house coming to Arkansas. During the last week of July, 100 houses were shipped from Lustron, which was an all-time high for a week's time, and 42 houses were shipped on July 31<sup>st</sup>, an all-time daily high. In the first 12 months of production, a total of 1,250 houses had been manufactured.<sup>48</sup>

Lustron dealers complained that the assembly of the house took much longer than the factory estimated – 1,200 hours versus 350 hours – and that one "could paper the walls with the assembly blueprints." Since the company realized that some of the problems were with the design and manufacture of the house, prominent Boston architect Carl Koch was consulted with on how to improve the process to make the assembly easier. Koch found that there were several fundamental problems after a thorough analysis of Lustron's operations. The challenges that Koch had to address were "improving the efficiency of the company's current machinery and sequence of production, reducing the number and complexity of component parts, and expanding the product line without increasing plant capacity."<sup>49</sup>

After his analysis of the company's operations, Koch had several suggestions. With respect to the steel panels, Koch suggested an increase in the size of the panels from two-foot square to two-foot wide by eight-feet long. He also suggested that they be rolled out and cut to length in a continuous process rather than cut and punched intermittently. The new system, Koch showed, would save money associated with labor and material costs. Koch also wanted to redesign the roof system since he thought it was not attractive. However, the current design was cost effective so it was not redesigned. Another suggestion that Koch wanted to carry out, although it ultimately was never changed, was the window design. Koch suggested using a modular window that could be interchangeable with the newly designed wall panels, instead of the four sizes that were used.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>47</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. 79.

<sup>48</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. 85 and 87.

<sup>49</sup> Knerr, Douglas. *Suburban Steel: The Magnificent Failure of the Lustron Corporation, 1945-1951*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2004, p. 147-148.

<sup>50</sup> Knerr, Douglas. *Suburban Steel: The Magnificent Failure of the Lustron Corporation, 1945-1951*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2004, pp. 149-150.

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However, the most significant change that Koch suggested, and one that would be extremely beneficial to dealers, was the reduction of the number of components shipped to the site from over 3,000 to 37. If it were carried out through more pre-assembly at the factory, Koch predicted that it would bring about better quality control and cost savings to boot. With fewer parts to assemble, the houses could be erected quicker and in larger quantities.<sup>51</sup>

Although production had steadily increased through the first part of 1949, storm clouds were building on the horizon. On July 3, 1949, *Time* magazine published an article about Lustron titled "Bathtub Blues" that was critical of the company and its president along with the RFC. The many loans that the government had given Lustron were also questioned.<sup>52</sup> In August, the RFC made another \$2 million loan to Lustron, which raised the company's total debt to \$37.5 million. In addition, during the last two weeks of August 1949, 700 employees were laid off. Although the layoffs were blamed on problems with the production line, it was really the end of Lustron's glory days.<sup>53</sup>

The call for investigations into the company by the House Banking and Currency Committee to look at allegations of mismanagement and waste of RFC funds in October 1949 also negatively impacted the company. Although the company was producing a high of 26 houses a day in August, it slumped to only six houses a day by October. Although 2,100 houses had been produced, only 1,700 had been sold, and two-thirds of the company's employees had been laid off. One small bright spot, however, was that the company had begun producing panels and other parts for one-car and two-car matching garages along with breezeways and patios.<sup>54</sup>

By the end of 1949, things were really heating up for Lustron. On December 28<sup>th</sup>, the RFC terminated its loans to the company, and the following day Lustron was given an ultimatum to submit a reorganization plan by January 6, 1950. Just a week later, the RFC declared that Lustron was in default on the vast majority of their loans, and it began to look at foreclosure, receivership, or some other way to seize the Lustron Corporation's assets.<sup>55</sup>

When an outside firm evaluated the problems at Lustron, the biggest finding was that the homes that the company was producing were no longer moderately priced. The two-bedroom Westchester model had increased in price from the initial proposed price of \$7,000 to \$10,000-\$12,000, a sizeable increase. In light of the finding, Strandlund had his engineers develop a new model, referred to as the "Newport." The first one shipped in November 1949, but they were not generally released until February 1950. However, due to the issues with the RFC, the Newport

<sup>51</sup> Knerr, Douglas. *Suburban Steel: The Magnificent Failure of the Lustron Corporation, 1945-1951*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2004, p. 150.

<sup>52</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. 85.

<sup>53</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. 88.

<sup>54</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. 89.

<sup>55</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. 92.

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did not get wide distribution and was not as well received by the public. Even so, the Newport was not enough, and on February 14, 1950, the RFC ordered foreclosure proceedings to be started against Lustron.<sup>56</sup>

The suit of foreclosure against Lustron's \$36,466,273 mortgage was filed on February 22, 1950, and was assigned to U.S. District Judge Mell G. Underwood. On March 6<sup>th</sup>, Clyde M. Foraker of Columbus was appointed as the company's receiver by Judge Underwood. (Foraker was initially appointed for a thirty-day trial period, but it was extended for an indefinite period on April 3<sup>rd</sup>.) Two days later Foraker fired all but two of Lustron's top officials, including Strandlund, to save money. As Fetters and Kohler write, "It was a staggering blow to Strandlund, but it was done. The plant limped along under Foraker's direction producing still more Westchesters, Newports, and various other parts, but the pace had fallen well off and it was a token production as everyone waited for the next shoe to fall."<sup>57</sup>

On May 5, 1950, Judge Underwood ordered that the Columbus plant be sold along with its machinery, land, and Lustron's patent rights. Around the same time, the machinery was stopped along with the conveyors and the enameling furnaces were also shut down. A skeleton crew of 70 workers needed to handle the final details of the receiver were kept while the remaining employees were let go. The final action of Foraker was that he

...organized the sale of assets by auction for June 6 from a platform that was built in front of the building's entrance. Although a crowd of 300 people milled about, when deputy marshal Robert Sack called for bids, only the RFC called out their bid for \$6 million. The bid still had to be confirmed by Judge Underwood on the following Friday at 2 P.M. to become binding. Then, in a separate transaction, an estimated \$700,000 worth of unmortgaged steel intended for the houses was awarded to Lafayette Steel Co. of Detroit and Chicago for \$645,000. The RFC now had exactly what it wanted: full control of the plant, and the removal of Strandlund from the enterprise. Even the agency itself was somewhat surprised at how easy it had been.<sup>58</sup>

Before the factory closed, a total of 2,680 Lustron houses were built in the United States, the Territory of Alaska, and in Venezuela. The last house was shipped from the factory on June 6, 1950. Also on June 6, 1950, 36 cash orders were returned to prospective buyers since the factory would not be able to deliver the homes.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>56</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. 94.

<sup>57</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. 96-97.

<sup>58</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. 97.

<sup>59</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. 97.

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The bitter end of Lustron is well summarized in the book *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment*, which states:

What had begun as an RFC coup d'état to wrest control of Lustron from Strandlund, obtain the plant at farmsale prices, and make a substantial profit, was thwarted by the RFC's own meddling and ended in a rout. The Lustron Corporation withered away, the physical plant was seized by the U.S. Navy, and the equipment ruined by removing it quickly from the Columbus facility. ...

Finally, the Lustron Corporation gave up its last gasp on February 16, 1960, when the Trustees of the Estate of Lustron Corporation – Klein, Murphy and McCahey – petitioned to destroy all books, records, and papers which were stored in Columbus, Ohio, and Chicago, Illinois. Not much later, they filed the final report and account and closed forever file 50 B 447.<sup>60</sup>

After the closing and dissolution of Lustron, in 1953 Strandlund became president of Jerry O'Mahony, Inc., a company that manufactured diners. Once he retired, he moved to Florida, although he eventually moved to Minneapolis, Minnesota, where he died on December 24, 1974. As his wife Clara later told the *Minneapolis Tribune*, "It was his dream that every Joe could have a house... a lot of people have this misconception that he milked the government out of all this money, but no one could start a business of this kind and have them call in a loan in two years. He actually died of a broken heart."<sup>61</sup>

By the end of 1949, according to Lustron records, twelve Lustron houses had been shipped to Arkansas. It is known that at least three of the houses, including the Matthews House, were shipped to Little Rock, with at least one each going to North Little Rock and West Helena. It is unknown where the other seven homes were shipped. Of the states where homes had been shipped by the end of 1949, the most went to Illinois (307 homes) while the fewest went to South Carolina (2 homes), and a total of 1,970 homes had been shipped from the Columbus factory. Interestingly, five homes were also exported – two to Alaska and two to Venezuela, along with one to an unknown destination.<sup>62</sup>

The Matthews House was built c.1949 for Mary H. Matthews, an X-ray technician at the University of Arkansas School of Medicine (now UAMS). (Although Matthews' first name was

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<sup>60</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. 107 and 109.

<sup>61</sup> Knerr, Douglas. *Suburban Steel: The Magnificent Failure of the Lustron Corporation, 1945-1951*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2004, p. 181.

<sup>62</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. 92 and 141.

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Mary, she went by Helen almost exclusively.) The address was first listed in the 1951 Little Rock city directory.<sup>63</sup>

Mary Helen (Gillespie) Matthews apparently spent time in Louisiana before coming to Little Rock, since she became a Radiology Technician at Shreveport, Louisiana's, Charity Hospital in 1935. By 1941, she was working at the McAlmont location of the Isaac Folsom Clinic, and then became employed at UAMS in 1947. Until her retirement from UAMS in 1979, she served in various positions in the Department of Radiology or School of X-Ray Technology, including Instructor, Chief Instructor, Technical Director, Chief Instructor, and Director of Graduate and Continuing Education.<sup>64</sup>

The time that Matthews came to work in Radiology at UAMS was a time of growth in the school following World War II. As one reminiscent history of the department states:

In an effort to build up each department in the post war period, Dr. [Isadore] Meschan was given full rein [sic.] with encouragement to go ahead. He immediately opened a school for training of technologists, accepted residents in Radiology and worked toward enlarging the department. ...

At this time the department was centralized in the School of Medicine Building [which is now the Bowen Law School]. The department grew by topsy – adding a room here and there where possible.<sup>65</sup>

In addition to her work at UAMS, Matthews was also involved with the work of the Arkansas Society of Radiologic Technologists. A press release for the 1967 annual spring refresher course for x-ray technicians indicated that “Mrs. Helen Matthews, chief instructor in the University’s School of X-Ray Technology and coordinator for the meeting, said some 400 x-ray technicians from throughout the state have been invited.”<sup>66</sup>

The choice of a Lustron house made perfect sense for Matthews. After World War II, which her husband had served in, he suffered from severe post-traumatic stress disorder. Due to the severity of his condition, he lived at the Veterans Administration hospital after the war, leaving Helen to care for a house on her own. Since the Lustron’s porcelain-enameled steel construction meant virtually no maintenance, it would have been the perfect type of house for her to own.

<sup>63</sup> *Polk's Little Rock, North Little Rock City Directories, 1949-2013.*

<sup>64</sup> *Caduceus* (Yearbook of the University of Arkansas School of Medicine). 1950-1979. In the collection of the Historical Research Center, UAMS Library, Little Rock, Arkansas.

<sup>65</sup> Information on the UAMS Radiology Department from the collection of the Historical Research Center, UAMS Library, Little Rock, Arkansas. HRC Archives, Box 278(1), File 6.

<sup>66</sup> Press release for the 1967 annual spring refresher course of the Arkansas Society of Radiologic Technologists from the collection of the Historical Research Center, UAMS Library, Little Rock, Arkansas. HRC Archives, Box 278(2), File 9.

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This was especially true since she had her own career that would have left her little free time to deal with maintaining a house.<sup>67</sup>

The Lustron that Matthews had built was a Westchester two-bedroom model in Dove Gray. Lustron offered their homes in four colors, which were Dove Gray, Maize Yellow, Surf Blue, and Desert Tan. Interior colors included a neutral light gray, a blue, a yellow, and a pink. The colors for the houses were designed by noted colorist Howard Ketchum. The other Lustron in Little Rock is also Dove Gray while the model in North Little Rock is Surf Blue and the model in West Helena is Desert Tan. (A Maize Yellow example also existed in Little Rock until it was demolished c.2005.)<sup>68</sup>

Although Matthews remained in the Little Rock area until at least the late 1970s when she retired from UAMS, she only lived in the house until c.1960 when Grover A. Wallace and his wife Imogene were listed as the residents. (Matthews was listed at the address in 1959 and Wallace first appears in 1961; a directory was not published in 1960.) When Wallace purchased the home, he was an agent for the Lincoln Income Life Insurance Company, but by 1970 he had changed jobs, working for Esquire Barber Service. It is also likely that the addition to the house was constructed shortly after the Wallaces purchased the house. The Wallaces retained ownership of the house, even though it did not always appear in the city directories, until September 8, 1999, when it was sold to Ronnie E. and Mary A. Sanders for \$34,000. The Sanders remained in the house until it was sold to the City of Little Rock on June 10, 2013.<sup>69</sup>

### SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROPERTY

Douglas Knerr wrote in his book *Suburban Steel: The Magnificent Failure of the Lustron Corporation, 1945-1951* that "The Lustron Corporation was once the largest and most completely industrialized housing company in the history of the United States. Beginning in 1947, Lustron manufactured porcelain-enameled steel houses in a one-million-square-foot plant on 106 acres of land in Columbus, Ohio. At peak production the plant used more electricity than the entire city of Columbus."<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, company president Carl Strandlund, when addressing child Wesley Pearce on a radio program said, "Young man, you are standing in the greatest single development in housing since they first put one stone on top of another"<sup>71</sup>

At the time of its existence in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Lustron was indeed the most successful prefabricated housing company to date. Although the company did not greatly help the housing shortage after World War II, by producing just over 2,600 homes, Lustron did ultimately bring change to the American housing industry. However, Lustron's role in the pre-

<sup>67</sup> Saar, Amanda. Head, Historical Research Center, UAMS. Conversation with the author. 10 September 2013.

<sup>68</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. 49 and 69.

<sup>69</sup> *Polk's Little Rock, North Little Rock City Directories*, 1949-2013, and information on the house from the Pulaski County Assessor's website at [www.pulaskicountyassessor.net](http://www.pulaskicountyassessor.net).

<sup>70</sup> Knerr, Douglas. *Suburban Steel: The Magnificent Failure of the Lustron Corporation, 1945-1951*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2004, p. 1.

<sup>71</sup> Knerr, Douglas. *Suburban Steel: The Magnificent Failure of the Lustron Corporation, 1945-1951*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2004, p. 106.



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fabricated-housing industry went further than just the house itself. "Lustron's recognition of the importance of environmental factors, such as site and neighborhood planning, reveal a commitment to address issues beyond the mere process of prefabrication. Indeed, the company devised detailed plans for the 'proper' placement of its houses in neighborhood and community settings."<sup>72</sup> Lustron developed a "Planning Guide" that gave specific instructions on how to place the house in community environments. The Guide included detailed sections on street design and layout, cul-de-sacs, planting strips, topographic consideration, the arrangement of the house on the lot, setbacks, and also the integration of community elements such as recreational facilities, schools, and shopping centers. The Guide was based on the Federal Housing Administration's 1940 publication *Successful Subdivisions*.<sup>73</sup>

As a way to help foster "Lustron communities" and to encourage suburban developers to utilize Lustron homes, the company created a fleet sales department. Lustron had a close relationship with American Community Builders, Inc., the developers of Park Forest, Illinois, and also marketed its community approach with other suburban developers in major American cities. The community approach "became a major goal of the company's sales strategy, which defined the creation of a 'complete package' – lot, house, and community – as a key to sustained long-term growth."<sup>74</sup>

The Lustron was also significant in that the house's design and quality demonstrated that most Americans would accept a prefabricated house. This was especially significant since previous perceptions had been that prefabricated houses were seen as "cheap, impermanent 'crisis' housing." The acceptance of the Lustron by the public was greatly illustrated by a 1953 survey that was conducted by U.S. Steel Corporation to gauge the possibility of also stepping into the market. Of the 320 surveys that were sent out, 200 owners returned the questionnaire. The survey covered a wide variety of topics including age and income levels, length of occupancy, types of houses previously owned, and where the respondent had first heard about the Lustron. The survey also asked about the design features of the house and finally asked the respondent to compare the Lustron with other prefabricated houses, other steel prefabricated houses, and conventionally built houses.<sup>75</sup>

The results of the survey clearly showed that the public had accepted the Lustron, a significant change in opinion from just a few years before. In summary, the survey found:

In conclusion, the survey revealed that 97 percent of the respondents preferred the Lustron house to their previous houses for three main reasons: low maintenance costs, ease of cleaning,

<sup>72</sup> Knerr, Douglas. *Suburban Steel: The Magnificent Failure of the Lustron Corporation, 1945-1951*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2004, p. 16.

<sup>73</sup> Knerr, Douglas. *Suburban Steel: The Magnificent Failure of the Lustron Corporation, 1945-1951*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2004, p. 17.

<sup>74</sup> Knerr, Douglas. *Suburban Steel: The Magnificent Failure of the Lustron Corporation, 1945-1951*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2004, p. 17.

<sup>75</sup> Knerr, Douglas. *Suburban Steel: The Magnificent Failure of the Lustron Corporation, 1945-1951*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2004, p. 184.

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and convenient floor plan. Ninety-eight percent liked the overall design and the appearance of the porcelain-enameled surfaces, and 95 percent said that they would purchase another Lustron house or a comparably featured steel house. When asked what changes they would suggest, 11 percent desired a larger kitchen, and 11 percent wanted access to the bathroom and bedrooms without going through the living room. Only 7.5 percent cited 'expandability' as an issue that would influence the purchase of another steel prefabricated house."<sup>76</sup>

Clearly, the public liked the Lustron and would have continued to buy and live in them if the company had continued. As Knerr writes in his book, *Suburban Steel: The Magnificent Failure of the Lustron Corporation, 1945-1951*, "Lustron was indeed revolutionary, particularly with respect to the scale and scope of its operations and the level of federal support that it initially received. It may, however, have been too radical. Not from a product perspective, for the market acceptance of the Lustron house demonstrated that the public would buy a porcelain-enameled steel dwelling, but from a process perspective."<sup>77</sup>

The influence of the Lustron house did not stop, however, with the closing of the company, but continues up to the present day. For example, the housing industry continues to use prefabricated technologies in the construction of houses today. As Knerr points out:

Industrialization is now a reality in residential construction across a wide range of housing forms. Perhaps the most familiar is the mobile home, also called the manufactured house, since it is rarely mobile in its present use. Despite a legacy of criticism and condescension, manufactured housing plays an important role in the housing market as the "predominant unsubsidized type of affordable housing in the United States." The manufactured housing industry is especially important in providing decent housing in less populated areas, but its impact is felt nationwide across a surprising demographic range. Over 12.5 million people live in manufactured houses, and the industry is growing at nearly twice the rate as the conventional homebuilding industry.<sup>78</sup>

Interestingly, the Lustron house is also significant in how it has influenced construction, especially with the rise of environmentalism. The use of prefabricated components and systems have greatly helped in reducing waste at the building site. In addition, the rising cost of lumber, coupled with its decreasing quality, has led the building industry to look more closely and

<sup>76</sup> Knerr, Douglas. *Suburban Steel: The Magnificent Failure of the Lustron Corporation, 1945-1951*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2004, p. 185.

<sup>77</sup> Knerr, Douglas. *Suburban Steel: The Magnificent Failure of the Lustron Corporation, 1945-1951*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2004, p. 191.

<sup>78</sup> Knerr, Douglas. *Suburban Steel: The Magnificent Failure of the Lustron Corporation, 1945-1951*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2004, p. 192.

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seriously at building materials other than wood, and several companies have promoted the use of steel in residential construction. At a recent National Association of Home Builders convention in Houston, Texas, for example, several companies cited the innovative quality of the Lustron's steel frame, and several steel framing systems on display were strikingly similar to the Lustron system. Companies also played up the same advantages that Lustron did in 1947, including durability and structural stability.<sup>79</sup>

The Mary H. Matthews Lustron House is a rare example of the work of this significant company in Arkansas, and it illustrates how Arkansas residents were also trying to grapple with the housing shortage that was plaguing the country after World War II. The porcelain-enameled steel Lustron House of the late 1940s was developed as a pre-fabricated house that could hopefully 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. Although the Lustron did not live up to its expectations, it did influence the housing industry for decades to come by introducing new materials to the housing market as well as introducing the feasibility of prefabrication and mass production. Due to the fact that it is 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**.

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<sup>79</sup> Knerr, Douglas. *Suburban Steel: The Magnificent Failure of the Lustron Corporation, 1945-1951*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2004, pp. 193-194..

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## 9. Major Bibliographical References

**Bibliography** (Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form.)

*Caduceus* (Yearbook of the University of Arkansas School of Medicine). 1950-1979. In the collection of the Historical Research Center, UAMS Library, Little Rock, Arkansas.

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Saar, Amanda. Head, Historical Research Center, UAMS. Conversation with the author. 10 September 2013.

Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps for the City of Little Rock: 1913, 1939, and 1950.

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**Previous documentation on file (NPS):**

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_
- recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # \_\_\_\_\_

**Primary location of additional data:**

- State Historic Preservation Office
  - Other State agency
  - Federal agency
  - Local government
  - University
  - Other
- Name of repository: \_\_\_\_\_

**Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned):** PU5894

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**10. Geographical Data**

**Acreege of Property** Less than one acre.

Use either the UTM system or latitude/longitude coordinates

**Latitude/Longitude Coordinates**

Datum if other than WGS84: \_\_\_\_\_

(enter coordinates to 6 decimal places)

- |                        |                       |
|------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Latitude: 34.743629 | Longitude: -92.330475 |
| 2. Latitude:           | Longitude:            |
| 3. Latitude:           | Longitude:            |
| 4. Latitude:           | Longitude:            |

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Or

**UTM References**

Datum (indicated on USGS map):

NAD 1927 or  NAD 1983

- |             |                 |                   |
|-------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| 1. Zone: 15 | Easting: 561285 | Northing: 3844816 |
| 2. Zone:    | Easting:        | Northing:         |
| 3. Zone:    | Easting:        | Northing:         |
| 4. Zone:    | Easting :       | Northing:         |

**Verbal Boundary Description** (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

Cunninghams W46 67' of 1 2 & 3 10.

**Boundary Justification** (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

The boundary includes all of the land historically associated with the property.

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**11. Form Prepared By**

name/title: Ralph S. Wilcox, National Register & Survey Coordinator  
organization: Arkansas Historic Preservation Program  
street & number: 323 Center Street, Suite 1500  
city or town: Little Rock state: AR zip code: 72201  
e-mail: ralph@arkansasheritage.org  
telephone: (501) 324-9787  
date: January 14, 2014

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### Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A **USGS map** or equivalent (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
- **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map.
- **Additional items:** (Check with the SHPO, TPO, or FPO for any additional items.)

### Photographs

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels (minimum), 3000x2000 preferred, at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map. Each photograph must be numbered and that number must correspond to the photograph number on the photo log. For simplicity, the name of the photographer, photo date, etc. may be listed once on the photograph log and doesn't need to be labeled on every photograph.

### Photo Log

Name of Property: Mary H. Matthews Lustron House

City or Vicinity: Little Rock

County: Pulaski County

State: Arkansas

Photographer: Travis Ratermann

Date Photographed: January 13, 2014

Description of Photograph(s) and number, include description of view indicating direction of camera:

1 of 16. North façade, looking southeast.

2 of 16. West façade, looking southeast.

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- 3 of 16 . South façade, looking northeast.
- 4 of 16 . South façade, looking north.
- 5 of 16 . East façade, looking northwest.
- 6 of 16 . East façade, looking southwest.
- 7 of 16 . View of the dining room, built-in china cabinet, and view into the kitchen, looking northeast.
- 8 of 16 . View of one of the upper cabinets in the kitchen, looking east.
- 9 of 16 . View of the linen closet outside of the bathroom, looking northeast.
- 10 of 16 . View of the bathroom, looking east.
- 11 of 16 . View of the second bedroom showing the original window opening, looking southeast.
- 12 of 16 . View of the second bedroom showing the picture window, looking east.
- 13 of 16 . View of the closet doors in the master bedroom, looking east.
- 14 of 16 . View of the built-in vanity in the master bedroom, looking north.
- 15 of 16 . View of the original south wall of the house inside the addition, looking north.
- 16 of 16 . View of the living room and built-in bookcase, looking southwest.

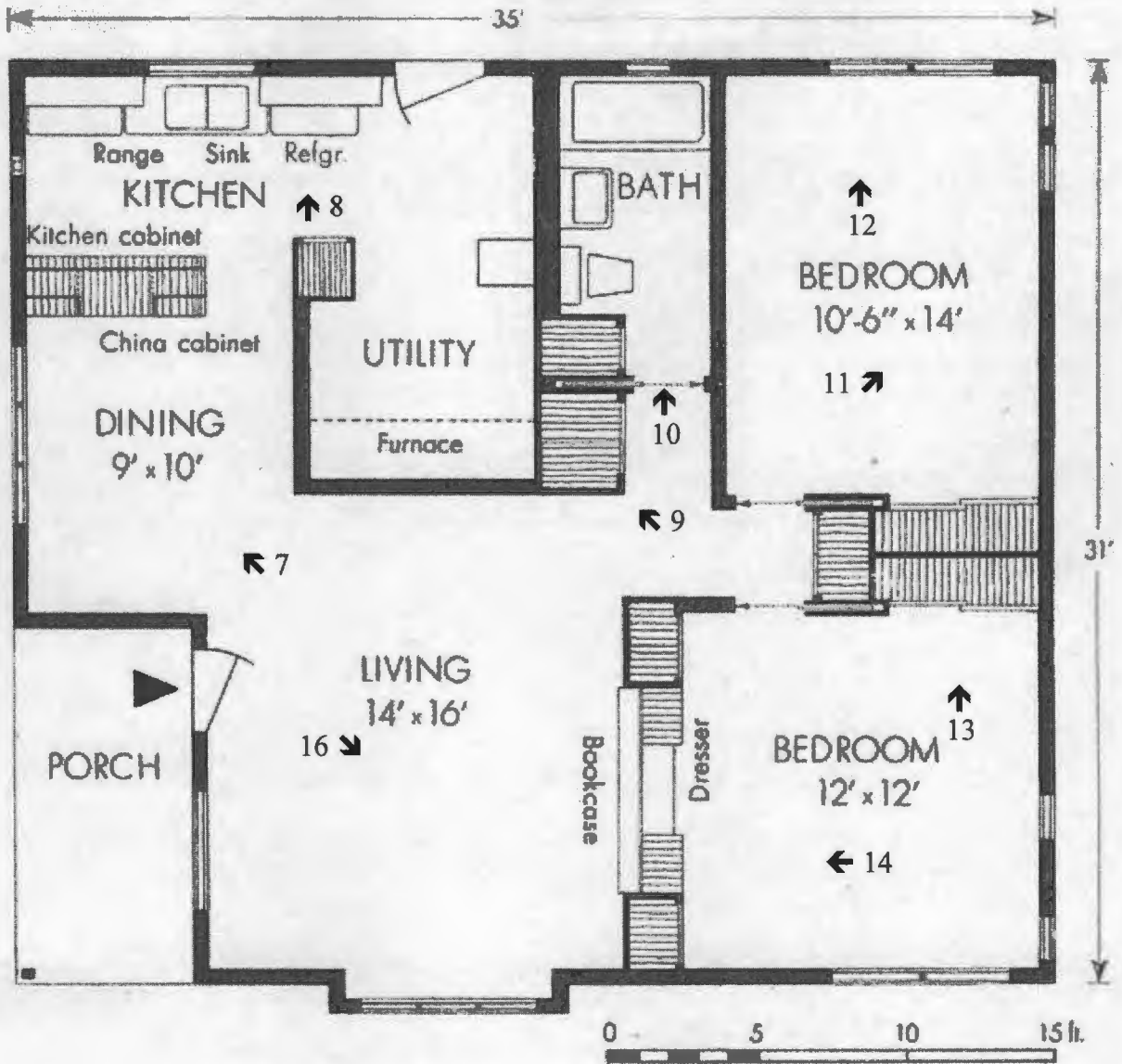


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**Photo Key:**

6 ↘



1 ↗

2 ↗

← North

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**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 460 et seq.).

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 100 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Office of Planning and Performance Management, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC.