

Kress Building

720 South Main Street, Del Rio, Texas 78840

by

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This is a text that I had hoped would lead to a historical marker application. It never happened, but the building is beautiful and has some cool history behind it.

Del Rio's Kress Building is one of the most prominent and stylish structures in the heart of the city. The building has had only two occupants: the S.H. Kress & Company, and most recently, J.P. Sanchez. The exterior of the building is in near pristine condition while the interior is being rehabilitated (after a short period of vacancy) by Sanchez.

The S.H. Kress & Company five-and-dime store was one of the fixtures of Main Street, America. The company established stores from coast to coast and in Hawaii. Texas was home to the second greatest number of stores. The first store opened in Memphis, Tennessee in 1896, and the company particularly targeted the American South. Samuel Kress concluded this region of the country had no five-and-ten-cent stores and was also "understored" generally. At the time of Samuel Kress (1863-1955) death his company operated 262 stores. In the early years Kress stores sold products that cost ten cents or less; in 1901 the selection was expanded to products up to a quarter.¹

¹ Bernice L. Thomas, *America's 5 & 10 Cent Stores: The Kress Legacy*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1997 (for the National Building Museum), pages vii-5.

Kress stores were known for their distinctive storefronts. Kress stores’ “artistic expression” was not common in retail commercial architecture in that day, but the storefronts became its own advertising—a successful means of creating brand loyalty.²

Max and Anna Stool, owners of several downtown Del Rio properties, built Del Rio’s Kress Building under a 1926 contract.³ (See Appendix A.) Samuel Kress was a “pioneer in establishing a company identity by means of a ‘signature storefront.’” (See Appendix B.) That is exactly what the Stools did for Kress in Del Rio. The building was designed by E.J. Hoffman, the head of the Kress company’s architectural division from 1918 to 1928. “Hoffman’s contribution to the development scheme was an elaborate three-story yellow brick store with a heavy cornice rising above the long, low department store adjacent to it.” Construction of the Del Rio Kress Building was completed in 1927.⁴

After Anna died (March 26, 1934), Max and the couple’s children signed a partition deed (dated September 4, 1936) dividing Anna’s one-half share of the marriage property. Max Stool kept the Montgomery Ward Building, the subject of another VVCHC historical marker application; son Joseph took the Woolworth Building; son William, the Guarantee Building. Goldie Stool took the Kress Building property. The partition deed recognized that the Kress lease remained in effect for another fifty-two years. The property could not be sold until after the conclusion of the lease.⁵

Goldie Stool Giss owned the property until her death, and her estate after that. After the deaths of Goldie Stool Giss and her husband, their son Maurice M. Giss sold the property to a

² Thomas, *America’s 5 & 10 Cent Stores: The Kress Legacy*, page ix.

³ VVC, Clerk’s Office, Deed Records, Vol. 62, pages 202+; Vol. 68, pages 316+; Vol. 75, pages 261+.

⁴ VVC, Clerk’s Office, Deed Records, Vol. 62, pages 202+; Thomas, *America’s 5 & 10 Cent Stores: The Kress Legacy*, pages 32-37.

⁵ VVC, Clerk’s Office, Deed Records, Vol. 91, pages 390+.

New York firm called Shadrall Associates. Shadrall Associates sold the property with the building in 1999 to Del Rio builder J.P. Sanchez.⁶

Kress closed its doors in Del Rio about 1996, but the structure remains intact—a Del Rio landmark in the heart of Del Rio’s Main Street District. Kress Buildings elsewhere around the state have been honored with historical markers; now is the time for Del Rio’s Kress to receive the same.

Bibliography—

Bernice L. Thomas, *America’s 5 & 10 Cent Stores: The Kress Legacy*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1997 (for the National Building Museum).

Val Verde County Clerk’s Office, Deed Records.

Photo of Kress exterior

“Kress buildings that no longer house Kress stores are still a gift in the form of an architectural legacy.... The Kress logo often remains at the top of the parapet, and the Kress name figures in the building’s new identity, thereby acknowledging its origin and its position as a local landmark.... The refurbished buildings often serve as incentives to rejuvenate other buildings for new purposes.” Thomas, *America’s 5 & 10 Cent Stores: The Kress Legacy*, pages 169-170.

Photo of Kress interior

“The stores are highly adaptable buildings suitable for a variety of new uses. After the wooden display counters that defined the interior space of the selling floor are removed, what is left is a vast rectangular shell interrupted only by support columns.” Thomas, *America’s 5 & 10 Cent Stores: The Kress Legacy*, page 170.

⁶ VVC, Clerk’s Office, Deed Records, Vol. 91, pages 390+; Vol. 512, pages 118+; Vol. 712, pages 519+.

Appendix A—

Appendix A includes excerpts from “Exhibit A” of the 1926 building contract between Max and Anna Stool and the S.H. Kress & Company. The exhibit shows how particular the Kress company was in maintaining its store identity.

“The Show windows are to be built according to the desire and standard details of tenant, and steel girders, together with cast iron columns, steel awning rail and hood are to be properly installed. The show windows are to be constructed with polished plate bent glass at entrances, and straight polished plate glass on fronts and returns, all of which are to be set in Kawneer settings and to have prism glass above with wrought iron ventilating transoms; plate glass mirrors with plate glass transoms in the rear and sides of interior of show windows.

“Marble tiling in entrances [sic] of the Kress special design, and galvanized sign hangers anchored [sic] in brick work above prism glass. The entrance doors shall be hung on double acting floor hingers with checking devices.

“An electric elevator and one (1) dumb waiter to be installed as desired by tenant.

“Metal ceiling and cornices of design to suit tenant, is to cover entire ceilings throughout building....

“One row of iron columns is to be used to support the second floor, also second story is to have only one row of iron columns as supports....

“A stationary awning is to be installed if and as desired by tenant....

“Skylights with proper controlling apparatus are to be located as desired by tenant.”

Appendix B—

Appendix B includes excerpts from Bernice L. Thomas, *America's 5 & 10 Cent Stores: The Kress Legacy*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1997, pages 30-36—a section titled “An Architectural Trademark: The Yellow Brick Store.”

“At the very outset, when Kress began building its own stores, the company did more than establish a canon of set features that would apply throughout its building history. Right away, it adopted a basic storefront design for its buildings, to be repeated as theme and variation all over the country until the end of the 1920s. The basic format was a buff or pale yellow brick façade with off-white trim in a simplified neoclassical style.... A projecting cornice and coping outlining the silhouette of a brick parapet were standard features. The Kress logo was at the summit, as always, rendered to conform to the color scheme in painted metal or glazed terracotta. These brick elevations were flat and conceived primarily in terms of straight line.... These buildings had a solid and dignified appearance, and the interiors were as predictable as the outsides. Many had oiled hardwood floors and pressed metal ceilings, with cast-iron columns on the selling floor.... These ‘yellow brick stores’ formed a considerable subgroup of S.H. Kress architecture.... More than fifty examples can be documented at present. Presumably there were others among the two hundred stores in the Kress chain at the end of the 1920s....

“The architecture of the yellow brick stores reflects an operating principle of the company. One can better understand why so many of these building were designed in the same basic style if one sees this pattern as a response to a rapidly growing company concern with maximizing efficiency and economy in every aspect of its operation. Repetition was a proven method of achieving these values. Kress built its series of yellow brick stores during the period of American history that Richard Guy Wilson, Dianne Pilgrim, and Dickran Tashjian have characterized as the Machine Age: the years from 1918 to 1941, the period between the two world wars.”