

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

For NPS use only

National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form

received

date entered

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

1. Name

historic Metropolitan Edison Building

and or common

2. Location

street & number 412 Washington Street

not for publication

city, town Reading

vicinity of

Downtown

state Pennsylvania

code

county Berks

code

3. Classification

Category

- district
- building(s)
- structure
- site
- object

Ownership

- public
 - private
 - both
- Public Acquisition**
- in process
 - being considered

Status

- occupied
 - unoccupied
 - work in progress
- Accessible**
- yes: restricted
 - yes: unrestricted
 - no

Present Use

- agriculture
 - commercial
 - educational
 - entertainment
 - government
 - industrial
 - military
- museum
 - park
 - private residence
 - religious
 - scientific
 - transportation
 - other: Vacant

4. Owner of Property

name City of Reading

street & number City Hall, 8th and Washington Streets

city, town Reading

vicinity of

state PA

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Berks County Court House

street & number Sixth and Court Streets

city, town Reading

state PA

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title Comprehensive Historic Sites Survey has this property been determined eligible? yes no

date 1978/79

federal state county local

depository for survey records Bureau of Planning and Development, City of Reading

city, town Reading

state PA

7. Description

Condition

excellent
 good
 fair

deteriorated
 ruins
 unexposed

Check one

unaltered
 altered

Check one

original site
 moved date _____

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

"Towering more than 150 feet in the air from the level of the sidewalk to the top of the balustrade that will surround the tiled roof, the new 12-story office building of the Metropolitan Edison Company, the site for which is now being cleared at the southwest corner of Madison Avenue and Washington Street, will be the highest structure in the city." With this opening paragraph quoted from an article in The Reading Eagle of Saturday, January 30, 1926, the plans to construct a new office building for the Metropolitan Edison Company were announced.

The Metropolitan Edison Company, located on one city block which measures 230 feet x 210 feet is bounded by Washington Street to the north, Fourth Street to the west, Court Street to the south and Madison Avenue to the east. The site is situated one block northwest of Penn Square, Reading's main intersection, and is adjacent to the Callowhill Historic District.

The building consists of a 12 story "L" shaped Tower, built in 1926 at the intersection of Washington Street and Madison Avenue and a compatible 1956 addition. At the time of its construction the building was flanked to the south and west by 2 and 3 story structures. To the south a 2 story portion of the building was erected. This lower element, faced with light brick rather than the limestone of the other facades, borders on a service driveway and clearly constituted the "back" of this structure. The tower is 119'-8" x 70'-6" with an underground service vault that extends to the south and measures approximately 29'-6" x 19'-8". In 1953 the American Casualty Company purchased the building from the original owners and in 1956 made the decision to construct an addition to the original structure, incorporating within it modern electrical and mechanical systems designed to continue the economic viability of the historic tower. The 1956 addition brought the overall dimensions of the building to 119'-8" x 169'-6". The balance of the block contains surface parking for the building.

Designed and built in 1926 and 1927 by Barstow Engineering which, with the Metropolitan Edison Company, were subsidiaries of the General Gas and Electric Company of New York State, it is the only structure remaining in Reading that is now associated with the City's significant electric industry. The building is also Reading's only example of one its period's phenomena, i.e. the "pattern" office building in the adopted style of the General Gas and Electric Company, and thus is a representative variation of the official corporate architectural style and serves as a monument to one of the northeastern United State's great holding companies of the 1920's.

The building was designed in the skyscraper style spearheaded by Louis Sullivan in the late 19th century in Chicago. This skyscraper of the Chicago style is characterized by a classical column-like treatment of the building emphasizing the vertical lines and height of the composition. The Metropolitan Edison Company's building, however, is distinctive in its exclusive use of Neo-classical detailing unique to Reading. The facade treatment divides the building into three distinct parts based on the classical column: the base or bottom portion, the shaft or middle portion and the capital or top of the building. A

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skeletal steel frame, constructed of steel weighing 14 lbs. per square foot of total building area, approximately twice the weight of current practice, supports the masonry exterior walls and building interiors.

The base of the building, rising about 30 feet above the sidewalk, is constructed of Indiana Limestone, that has been decoratively carved surrounding window and door openings. The windows and doors at the first floor level are framed in bronze with floral and leaf decoration in relief. Placed symmetrically between these openings are very ornate bronze lamps.

Separating the base from the shaft is a large projecting, carved limestone band. The shaft or midportion of the building is faced with a deep reddish brown brick that has been laid in the common bond pattern and rises to a height of 120 feet above the sidewalk. 8 story pilasters emphasize the height of the building and divide it into bays containing steel frame windows with limestone sills and brick soldier courses at the heads.

Rising an additional 34 feet to a height of approximately 154 feet above the sidewalk, the capital or top of the building is faced with terra cotta. An articulated band of this material demarcates the capital from the portion below. This 2 story portion repeats the pilaster treatment below and is topped by an ornate cornice and balustrade. A 2 story terra cotta penthouse containing elevator machinery and other mechanical equipment is set back from the roof line and repeats the design motifs found on the rest of the building.

The ornate building interior incorporates Classical detailing on the ground level. These ornate, main public spaces consist of a vestibule at the west end of the building, an elevator lobby, a customer service lobby and another vestibule at the east end of the building. Sumptuous decoration in these rooms include marble walls with fluted pilasters, decorative bronze elevator doors, inlaid travertine and marble floors, and ornate molded coffered ceilings and friezes finished with paint and 14 karat gold leaf. Ornate bronze chandeliers hang in these spaces as well as other fine bronze appointments. The upper floors offer excellent views of Reading and the surrounding hillsides. The narrow building configuration and numerous large windows flood the interior with daylight. Although more straightforward in design than the first floor public rooms, the upper floors contain elevator lobbies with terrazzo floors, ornate crown moldings and decorative brass appointments. The relative simplicity and openness of these upper floors facilitated the primary function of the building as office space manifesting paper flow.

The five story portion of the building constructed in 1956 complements the more solid appearance of the earlier portion with a lighter, modern feel, very popular and prevalent at the time. The north, east, and most of the south facades are a curtain wall composed of an aluminum frame infilled with alternating horizontal bands of windows and tan porcelain enamel panels. The west and portions of the south facades are made of tan brick laid in common band coursing. A recessed arcade faced with granite traverses the east elevation on Madison Avenue at street level. The interior is composed of light-filled open office areas with linoleum floors, painted plaster walls and a metal plenum ceiling.

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Designed to supplement the original structure, the addition is integrally linked with the original tower so that they function as a single unit. The principle entrance into the addition is via the tower. They are dependent on one another for satisfying life safety and code requirements, e.g. sharing toilet rooms and sharing fire stairs for exiting. Their mechanical and electrical systems are interdependent; the electrical switchgear and air conditioning chillers for the entire building are located in the addition, and the boilers for the heating system for the entire building are located in the tower. The increased floor areas as well as the improvements to the life safety, mechanical and electrical systems created with the construction of the addition have ensured the continuing economic viability of the original 1926 tower.

The presence of the Metropolitan Edison Building on the Reading skyline is an important and rather aggressive one due to both its height and design. The treatments of the facades as if conceptual columns with the emphasis on the verticality of the pilasters, the profiles and detailing of the various materials, and the richly decorated and appointed interiors give the building a sense of self assurance and urbaneness. These elements, combined with the pure Neo-Classical detailing and design heritage unique to Reading, give it a position of real importance in Reading's urban and historic fabric.

8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below					
<input type="checkbox"/> prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> community planning	<input type="checkbox"/> landscape architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> religion		
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-historic	<input type="checkbox"/> conservation	<input type="checkbox"/> law	<input type="checkbox"/> science		
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> literature	<input type="checkbox"/> sculpture		
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> social/		
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input type="checkbox"/> humanitarian		
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> theater		
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics government	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation		
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify)		

Specific dates 1926, 1956 **Builder Architect** A. Heilman & C. E. Stienmetz,
W. S. Bartstowe Co.

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

The Metropolitan Edison Building is significant because of its history in the economic growth of the region and because of its architectural contribution and uniqueness to Reading and Berks County. The building is historically significant as it is the only significant remaining structure which represents the technological and economical growth of the electric industry in Reading and eastern Pennsylvania. The invention of many electrical safety devices and the innovation of promoting the use of electricity were pioneered on this site. The building complex is also historically significant as the spawning and nurturing place for three major corporations; Metropolitan Edison Company, Gilbert-Commonwealth, and the CNA Insurance Company. The building is of architectural significance, especially to Reading and Berks County, because it is the area's only example of one of the period's phenomena: the "pattern" office building. Of unusual structural sophistication, the building's conservative commercial style is unique among the area's other "skyscrapers". It is perhaps Reading's foremost commercial building of its period for its use of quality materials, fine detailing, craftsmanship, and appointments. The stone, terra cotta and bronze work on the exterior and much of the marble and bronze work on the interior are well preserved. For a period the building was also the tallest "skyscraper" in Reading and featured an observation deck where tourists could have a commanding view of Reading and the surrounding countryside.

Reading was the founding home base of the Metropolitan Edison Company. One month before Thomas A. Edison lit the first street lights in New York City "the citizens of Reading witnessed a demonstration of electric lights..." this was in August of 1882 when a New York firm shipped to Reading a dynamo and 20 arc lamps. The shipment was made to J. H. Cheetham, who operated a planning mill at Franklin and Carpenter Streets. This equipment was temporarily installed for demonstration purposes, and members of the Board of Trade, city officials and the general public attended these demonstrations on several nights. Following this, talk persisted of forming an electric company, which was organized several months later.

On March 8, 1883, barely six months after Edison's New York triumph, Reading Electric Light and Power Company began operations in a building on Cherry Street. Its initial equipment consisted of the dynamo moved from Cheetham's mill and some additional apparatus.

"The original plant was equipped with generators for arc lighting and bipolar, direct-current generators for incandescent lights. Reports show that on January 1, 1889, 159 arc lamps were installed on streets and 34 arc lamps in stores, together with 2,350 10-candlepower incandescent lamps in stores and homes. The report also shows that electricity was supplied to operate six motors totaling 7 1/8 horsepower."

9. Major Bibliographical References

"Metropolitan Edison Company Clearing Site for 12-Story Structure", Reading Eagle,
Saturday, January 30, 1926, Reading, PA, p. 1

See continuation, page 6

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of nominated property 1.114

Quadrangle name Reading

Quadrangle scale 1:24,000

UTM References

A

1	8	4	2	1	0	5	0	4	4	6	5	3	0	0
Zone		Easting				Northing								

B

Zone		Easting				Northing								

C

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

D

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

E

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F

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G

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H

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Verbal boundary description and justification

The site is bounded and separated from all other sites by four public streets.

For legal description see continuation, page 7

List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

state NA --- code --- county --- code ---

state NA --- code --- county --- code ---

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Robert E. Bartmann

organization Bureau of Planning and Development
City of Reading date August 1, 1983

street & number City Hall, 8th and Washington Streets telephone 215/320-6326

city or town Reading state PA. 19601

12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

national state local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature 

Dr. Larry E. Tise,

title State Historic Preservation Officer date 9/19/83

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I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

date

Keeper of the National Register

Attest:

date

Chief of Registration

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The electric industry was an immediate success. The Cherry Street plant was not large enough so the company relocated in 1890 to larger quarters on South Seventh Street. Dr. Rigg, a pioneer in early electricity, developed the use of power for the electric car. He envisioned a day when much more power would be needed. Dr. Rigg, while working for the Reading Electric Light and Power Company along with some other investors, formed the Metropolitan Electric Company in 1894. In 1902 they purchased a large tract of land on the other side of the Schuylkill River in West Reading for the purposes of building a very large power generation station. Just prior to the construction of the new power plant, the Reading Electric Light and Power Company and the Metropolitan Electric Company were merged. This helped to raise capital for the new plant and at the same time ensure the availability of customers.

At its height the Seventh Street plant was generating 7,000 kilowatts. The new plant in West Reading started with a capacity of 13,500 kilowatts. Over the years the West Reading plant was upgraded and expanded. When the plant finally shut down in 1975 it had a generating capacity of 103,000 kilowatts.

In 1922 the Metropolitan Edison Company was formed by the merger between the Metropolitan Electrical Company, the Edison Electric Illuminating Company of Lebanon and the Lebanon Valley Electric Company. The Metropolitan Edison Company was a subsidiary of a much larger holding company in New York City, the General Gas and Electric Company. With the backing of much capital, Metropolitan Edison began a rapid expansion mostly by buying up smaller charter and operating companies in nearby communities.

Today Metropolitan Edison Company represents a consolidation of some 300 companies. Of these most were just "paper" charter companies that never operated. Sixty of the companies were operating companies which distributed electricity. Twenty companies were power generating companies. Metropolitan Edison now supplies electric service in 14 counties and to 151 municipalities in Pennsylvania

Immediately following the 1922 merger, General Gas and Electric constructed a Met-Ed office building in Lebanon. Under the overall direction of General executive Thomas Cheyne, this grandly-conceived commercial-style structure became the "pattern building" for the subsequent construction of office buildings by General Gas and Electric. Thus variations of the Lebanon office were constructed during the 1920's throughout General's utilities kingdom, notably in New York State but also in Reading, the style of the buildings becoming a trademark of the corporation.

Thomas Cheyne also served as supervisor of the design, construction and furnishing of the Reading home office. Construction began in the spring of 1926 and Met-Ed began its occupation of the building on July 13, 1927. It was to be the largest of General Gas' office buildings. Employees of the W. S. Barstowe Company, the engineering and structural subsidiary of General Gas and Electric, whose office was located in Reading, did the work: Arthur A. Heilman and C. E. Steinmets were the architects, Edward Tirrell the head of construction, James Powell the mechanical engineer, J. E. Tulpin, also of Barstowe, was the designer of the riveted structural steel framing, constructed of an unusually high 14 pounds of steel per square foot of building floor area. The entire building was

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constructed with the most advanced electronic equipment. The final cost, including furnishings (about which Thomas Cheyne was unusually particular) was approximately \$1,250,000. The fireproofed structure remains one of Reading's engineering landmarks.

Among Reading's other early Twentieth Century office buildings of comparable size, the Metropolitan Edison Building is distinctive in its conservatively classical use of commercial-style design, with none of the Renaissance Revival or Beaux-Arts flavor of the Baer and Colonial Trust Buildings, the "modern movement" details of the Abraham Lincoln, nor the art deco-inspired design of the Court House and Medical Arts Building. As a representative variation of the official architectural style of the Central Gas and Electric Company, the building also serves as a monument - unique in Reading - to one of the northeastern United States' great holding companies of the 1920's.

The building also has one of the most well-preserved exteriors of the structures of its type in Reading. It is twelve-stories high, and was the tallest building in Reading (the second tallest in 1927, the Colonial Trust, is nine-stories) until the sixteen-story Abraham Lincoln Hotel was erected in 1930. At the time of its construction the building's only fully exposed facades were those directly along Washington Street and Madison Avenue. Thus the Washington Street facade was the major focus. It is 150 feet high. The first two stores are faced with Indiana Limestone, the third through tenth stories with brick supplied by the local Glen-Gery Company, and the eleventh and twelfth stories with glazed terra cotta. Surmounted by a 32-inch parapet, the roof was tiled to provide a "promenade deck" for tourists. The Met-Ed building became quite a tourist attraction with its "promenade deck" accessible to the public. The first floor public space, along Washington Street, was sumptuously appointed, including bronze window casings, and the 14 karat gold gilded plaster ceiling, which still exists above a contemporary false ceiling. The elevator lobby, with its three bronze-doored elevators still intact (the first AC-operated elevators in the City), retains much of its original appearance. The 25-foot "Metropolitan Edison Company" sign, with its blue light bulbs, stood on the top of the structure from 1927 until the company moved out in 1954.

The Metropolitan Edison Company underwent incredible expansion until 1929, becoming one of the leading utility companies of Pennsylvania. This growth was diminished greatly after the Crash of 1929, but resumed again in the 1940's. Much of this growth took place while the home office was located at 412 Washington Street. Reading had one of the earliest below-ground electrical systems in the Met-Ed area, work for which began in the early 1920's and was virtually completed by the early 1950's. Much of the pioneer work in safety devices for electrical equipment was done in Reading. What 412 Washington Street was most renowned for, however, was its "home service" office. In the 1930's and 1940's, Met-Ed excelled in the research and development of home appliances. The merchandising push was enormous, with elaborate displays of the latest electrical products. The home office was extremely progressive in the introduction of the latest products to the people of Reading - an innovation soon to be emulated by many other power companies.

The Met-Ed offices were relocated to their present Muhlenberg Township location in 1954, after 412 was sold to the American Casualty Company.

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Soon after the Crash, the W. S. Barstowe Company went bankrupt and dissolved. E. M. Gilbert, a chief engineer with General Gas and Electric, gathered together some out-of-work Barstowe people and started an engineering firm which was originally located on three floors of 412 Washington Street. The firm which today is called Gilbert-Commonwealth grew since then to become one of the largest engineering companies in the world. With offices now located in other parts of Reading and in an office campus just south of Reading, the company has employed as many as 2500 engineers and highly skilled technicians. The service of Gilbert-Commonwealth encompass all matters of hydroelectric and nuclear power generation and distribution as well as environmental engineering and planning.

The increase in industrialization at the turn of the century gave rise to the need for employee and employer insurance. In 1902 the American Casualty Company was formed in Reading. It grew steadily as industry grew. First located in a small office at 15 North Sixth Street, the company had moved to larger quarters at 607 Washington Street by 1926. Continuing to expand, the firm purchased the Metropolitan Edison Building in 1953 and occupied the facility in 1954. Already crowded, a classroom for sales personnel was added to the thirteenth floor partially extending over the observation deck next to the elevator penthouse.

A few years following, the Reading Redevelopment Authority purchased and demolished the buildings surrounding the Metropolitan Edison Building as they had fallen into disrepair. American Casualty then purchased additional land and by 1956 had erected a compatible addition to the original along the unembellished south side (rear). At the same time that more space was added, modern electrical and mechanical systems were added; elevators upgraded; exits made more safe and accessible; rest rooms made more convenient; on-site parking added; and many other improvements made in such a manner that the whole was once again economically viable.

In 1963 American Casualty Company was merged with similar type insurance companies based in Chicago - the Continental Assurance Company of North America and the Continental Casualty Company - to form CNA. Reading offices were designated as regional offices. In 1982 the CNA offices were forced to move to still larger quarters on Penn Square. The building was then turned over to the City of Reading for redevelopment.

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"Metropolitan Edison Office Building Will Cost \$750,000", Reading Eagle,
Wednesday, January 6, 1926, Reading, PA, p. 5

Montgomery, Morton L., History of Reading, PA and the Anniversary Proceedings
of the Sesqui-Centennial, June 5-12, 1898, Reading, PA, 1898, p. 52

Office of Real Estate Registry, City of Reading, PA

Interview with Blaine Fabian, Fred Cox and Harold Sheeler; Metropolitan Edison
Company, Wednesday, January 27, 1982.

Althouse, Adam J., A History of Metropolitan Edison Company, originally
written 1948, as adapted for Berks County, 1982.

CNA, the Reading Story, dedication brochure, opening of CNA Plaza, Reading,
PA, 1982.

City Directories, City of Reading, various years from 1898.

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Legal Boundary Description

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Geographical Data

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All that certain tract or parcel of land together with the 12 story steel and brick office building and the 5 story brick office building connected thereto, parking lot and other improvements thereon erected, situate in the City of Reading, County of Berks and Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and being bounded on the North by Washington Street, on the South by Court Street, on the East by Madison Avenue, and on the West by North Fourth Street and being more fully bounded and described as follows, to wit:

Beginning at a point formed by the intersection of the Southerly building line of Washington Street (60 feet wide as shown on the topographical survey of the City of Reading) with the Easterly building line of North Fourth Street (60 feet wide as shown on the topographical survey of the City of Reading); thence extending in an Easterly direction along the Southerly building line of Washington Street, forming an interior angle of 90 degrees 14 minutes 30 seconds with the Easterly building line of North Fourth Street, a distance of 230.42 feet to a point formed by the intersection of the Southerly building line of Washington Street with the Westerly building line of Madison Avenue (20 feet wide as shown on the topographical survey of the City of Reading); thence extending in a Southerly direction along the Westerly building line of Madison Avenue, forming an interior angle of 89 degrees 45 minutes 30 seconds with the Southerly building line of Washington Street, a distance of 210.29 feet to a point formed by the intersection of the Westerly building line of Madison Avenue with the Northerly building line of Court Street (50 feet wide as shown on the topographical survey of the City of Reading); thence extending in a Westerly direction along the Northerly building line of Court Street forming an interior angle of 90 degrees 21 minutes with the Westerly building line of Madison Avenue, a distance of 230.42 feet to a point formed by the intersection of the Northerly building line of Court Street with the Easterly building line of North Fourth Street; thence extending in a Northerly direction along the Easterly building line of North Fourth Street forming an interior angle of 89 degrees 39 minutes with the Northerly building line of Court Street, a distance of 210.72 feet to the place of beginning.

Containing in area 1.114 acres of land.

Excepting and reserving thereout and therefrom all that certain tract of ground situate at the Southeast corner of North Fourth and Washington Streets, in the City of Reading, County of Berks and Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Containing approximately 75 square feet as conveyed in a deed from American Casualty Company of Reading, Pennsylvania to Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, dated February 12, 1980 and recorded in Deed Book Volume 1778, page 949, Berks County records.

Being the same premises which American Casualty Company of Reading, Pennsylvania, by deed dated March 28, 1980 and recorded in Deed Book Volume 1779, page 283, Berks County records, granted and conveyed unto The City of Reading.

WEST LEESPORT (LEESPORT P.O.) 5.9 MI.
TUCKERTON 2.1 MI.
5864 IV NW
(TEMPLE)

421 1223 TEMPLE 2.3 MI.

55'

7'30"

419

420

