

WESTERN CLAY MANUFACTURING COMPANY

CULTURAL RESOURCE SURVEY AND ASSESSMENT - KILNS

Helena, Montana

2011-2013

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Brick and tile manufacturing was once ubiquitous throughout much of the United States. Today, however, only a fraction of these industrial complexes survive. Of those standing, almost none preserves the buildings and machinery, kiln technology, and overall industrial landscape as the Western Clay Manufacturing Company site on the outskirts of Helena, Montana.



Above: Exterior Kiln 4, Western Clay Mfg. (Joe Elliott)



Above: Interior of Kiln 8, Western Clay Mfg. (Joe Elliott)

Founded in the mid-1880s under the leadership of Charles Bray and his son, Archie Bray, Sr., Western Clay became Montana's premiere brick and hollow clay tile manufacturing plant by the early 20th century. Stewarded by its successor, the internationally renowned Archie Bray Foundation for the Ceramic Arts – an organization located on the very grounds of the former manufacturing site—the complex promotes the rich relationship between the manufacture of industrial clay products and the ceramic arts.

Conscious of the original site's historical and cultural value, a partnership was formed in 2011 between the Foundation and the Montana Preservation Alliance (MPA). In an effort to assist the Archie Bray Foundation evaluate its many historic structures and machinery, the Architectural Conservation Laboratory (ACL) of the University of Pennsylvania conducted a general conditions assessment of the site, photo-documenting major structures, and recording and analyzing the beehive (downdraft) kilns. Employing various recording techniques, from hand measuring and rectified photography to laser scanning, the team sought to fully record the brick kilns, an increasingly threatened building type. A thorough understanding of both the evolution of the site and the current condition and integrity of its buildings and machinery will help the partners to strategize a creative future for this remarkable and now rare survival of American industrial heritage.

In collaboration with the Montana Preservation Alliance and the Archie Bray Foundation. The results of all phases of the project may be accessed through the project's website at www.conlab.org.

