

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "X" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name R. T. GREER & COMPANY VDHR File # 119-5001 12-19
other names/site number HERB HOUSE

2. Location

street & number 107 Pendleton Street N/A not for publication
city or town Marion vicinity
state Virginia code VA county Smyth code 173 zip code 24354

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination
 request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of
Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property
 meets does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant
(nationally statewide locally See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

[Signature] 4/12/97
Signature of certifying official Title Date

Virginia Department of Historic Resources
State or Federal agency and bureau

This property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. See continuation sheet for additional comments.

Signature of certifying official Title Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

reviewed and that the property is	Signature of the Keeper	Date of Action
<input type="checkbox"/> entered in the National Register See continuation sheet	_____	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> determined eligible for the National Register <input type="checkbox"/> See continuation sheet	_____	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> determined not eligible for the National Register	_____	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> removed from the National Register	_____	_____
Other explanation: _____		

R. T. GREER & COMPANY
Name of Property

Smyth County, Virginia
County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

Category of Property

(Check only one box)

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

Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	0	buildings
0	0	sites
0	0	structures
0	0	objects
1	0	Total

Name of related multiple property listing

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

COMMERCE/TRADE: Herb Warehouse

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

COMMERCE/TRADE: Specialty store

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions)

LATE 19TH AND EARLY 20TH CENTURY
AMERICAN MOVEMENTS: Commercial style

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation CONCRETE
walls BRICK
roof OTHER
other _____

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** removed from its original location.
- C** a birthplace or grave.
- D** a cemetery.
- E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F** a commemorative property.
- G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

COMMERCE

SOCIAL HISTORY

Period of Significance

1916-1946

Significant Dates

1916

1936

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Johnston, B. B., Carpenter

Cooley Bros., Brickwork

Sayers, T. K., Cementwork & Grading

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

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 # _____

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of repository:

Smyth-Bland Regional Library

R. T. GREER & COMPANY
Name of Property

Smyth County, Virginia
County and State

10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of Property 0.3 acres

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1 17 | 454000 | 4076360
Zone Easting Northing

3 _____ | _____ | _____
Zone Easting Northing

4 _____ | _____ | _____

See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title See Continuation Sheet

organization _____ date _____

street & number _____ telephone _____

city or town _____ state _____ zip code _____

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

Additional Items

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO.)

name C. B. Gwyn

street & number Gwyndirstrasse, P. O. Box 110 telephone (703) 783-8138

city or town Marion state VA zip code 24354

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. 470 et seq.)

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 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 Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P. O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reduction Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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Section Number 7 Page 1 R.T. Greer & Company, Smyth County, Virginia

SUMMARY DESCRIPTION

The R.T. Greer & Company Building is a functional building with an unusual history that was built as an herb warehouse in 1916 on a rectangular .3-acre lot in the town of Marion, Virginia. Facing west and north, the building commands a view of Main Street and Staley Creek. The three-story brick building with an oak post and beam framework rests on a concrete foundation, and many of its original features remain: original window sash and oak plank flooring, as well as the original grain elevator and turn-of-the century herb grinder. Despite a 1936 addition, the R. T. Greer & Company Building retains its original 1916 architectural integrity.

ARCHITECTURAL ANALYSIS

The 1916 R.T. Greer & Company Building is a three-story brick building measuring 83'x42'. The structural system is composed of load-bearing walls laid by Cooley Brothers, locally prominent African-American brick masons. Marion carpenter, B.B. Johnston, constructed the building's oak post and beam framework. Marion contractor, T.K. Sayers, graded the site and did the building cement work. The brick walls run in a common bond with segmental arches over all openings. The shallow shed roof, constructed of oak planking with a single-ply membrane, has side walls that are stepped at intervals to correspond to the mono-sloped roof. On the interior, the floor still retains its original oak planking and the exposed brick of the load-bearing walls. The fenestration is double-hung, one-over-one sash with several windows on the facade retaining their original floated glass.

The 1916 portion of the building is divided into two areas--the office and the warehouse--with the office at the west front facing the street on the first floor and the rest of the building given over to the warehouse space. The warehouse area is divided into three linear bays by the post-and-beam frame, whereas the office area has an open plan with a storage room on the northern side. The western facade of the original building is divided horizontally into two areas indicative of the interior division of function with the office on the first floor and the warehouse space on the top two floors. This separation is expressed by a horizontal brick ledge with brick dentils. The first floor has two doors and three windows and each of the two upper floors has four windows. The facade also has a cornice line composed of corbelled brick brackets supporting a brick ledge. The rear (east) elevation originally had four windows per floor similar to those on the western facade's two upper floors. Although the windows of the first two floors of the original 1916 portion of the building have been obscured by the 1936 drying room addition, the original openings remain. The north elevation is devoid of all fenestration, but has a loading door, while the south elevation has only two windows on the first floor in the office area.

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Section number 7 Page 2 R.T. Greer & Company Building, Smyth County, Virginia

The building still houses the original functional grain elevator, which has a plate engraved "Warner Elevator M'F'G. O., CIN'TI., O.; and the herb grinder with a plate engraved "Jos. Dick's Agr'l. Works Canton, Ohio," and dated 02 August 1900.

Six 4' concrete posts line the front of the building and flank the front entrance steps. These posts were once used to tether customers' horses.

In 1936, an L-shaped, two-story, drying room addition was constructed on the east and north sides of the building. The addition relates to the original portion of the building in both its structural design and fenestration. The addition's west elevation, set back considerably from the facade of the original portion, has a large loading door on the first floor and two windows and a door on the second floor. The addition is also divided functionally into two areas--drying room and loading dock--with the loading dock on the north side of the first floor and the drying room occupying the remainder of the first floor and all of the second.

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Section 8 Page 3 R. T. Greer & Company, Smyth County, Virginia

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The R.T. Greer & Company Building in Marion, Smyth County, Virginia is significant at the state level under Criterion A because of its important role in Appalachian commerce as a center for the purchase and sale of herbs. From the time of its construction in 1916 until 1968, R.T. Greer and Company collected, dried, ground, labeled, and prepared for shipment untold numbers of roots, herbs, barks, and berries. The herbs were then shipped to pharmaceutical houses all over the United States and abroad. The herb business represented a way of life and a means of economic survival for the people of Appalachian mountains, especially during the Great Depression when jobs were few and cash was scarce. Additional information obtained from over two hundred Day Books [Daily Receipts, Salesman Orders & Draft Registers] and other resources documents the substantial economic impact R.T. Greer & Company had within and beyond the boundaries of the local populace.¹ Built by Marion artisans, carpenter B.B. Johnston, cement and grading contractor, T.K. Sayers, and African-American brick masons, Cooley Brothers, the simple three-story brick building continues to serve as a focal point for the celebration of Appalachian traditions of herb collection and use.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The American herb business had its origins with Native Americans. Native American medicine men brewed their "yerbs" that were noted to possess mysterious healing powers, according to Mr. Cecil R. Greer.² Throughout its history, the R.T. Greer & Company firm was representative of a distinctive tradition in the cultural and medicinal history of our area and the entire nation. It existed in a time when doctors were scarce in the Appalachian mountains and people had to rely on home remedies handed down through the generations. Due partially to regional knowledge of Native American medicinal processes, European American Appalachians became very adept at using herbs for medicine. According to Fay Greer Sharp, daughter of George W. Greer, the drug manufacturers assigned research scientists to study the components of the recipes used by the mountain people. Some of our medicine today is derived from these formulas without alteration.³

Riley Thomas Greer, George W. Greer and F. P. McGuire came to Marion, Virginia from Watauga County, North Carolina, in 1904. They started a unique business on the south side of Main Street between Pendleton and Commerce Streets. This business developed into the largest of its kind in Appalachia: The R. T. Greer Crude Drug Company, dealers in roots and herbs.⁴ They selected Marion because it was a good shipping point in the center of an area which at that time produced more natural medicinal herbs than any other area of its size in America.⁵

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In 1916, R.T. Greer, G.W. Greer and C.C. Stafford, representing the R.T. Greer & Company firm, purchased the land on Pendleton Street from Walter E. Greer.⁶ Walter E. Greer had operated the Greer House & Auto Livery Stable for many years at this location.⁷ The current herb house building was constructed on this site in 1916.

The railroad, which reached Marion in 1856, and was upgraded by Norfolk & Western in the 1880's as a steelrail line, affected the growth and development of Marion, Virginia. At the turn of the century, the Norfolk & Western railroad depot in Marion was a key factor in the selection of this town by the Greer family for their new herb business. Marion was the trading and shipping point for Grayson County and the bordering North Carolina counties. Great numbers of covered wagons steadily came into the area. The wagons camped around the town.⁸ The railroad created the opportunity for businesses like the Herb House to flourish. R.T. Greer & Company, in turn, served not only its local community, but took on the regional trade from local residents who came to town to sell their herbs, berries, barks and roots. The railroad was a means of shipping herbs to pharmaceutical houses all over the United States and to ports for transportation abroad. This firm sold herbs to Eli Lilly, Parke-Davis, Wilcox, McKesson, Robbins, Rexall and other noted pharmaceutical firms. They bought sassafras for Uncle Charlie Hiers Root Beer, and provided the basis for Lydia Pinkham's natural tonic for women.⁹ They also shipped herbs to China, particularly Ginseng or 'sang' as the locals call it, through a big supplier, Mr. D.H. Figurito.¹⁰ In addition, a letter from Mr. Erich Blembel of Hamburg, Germany, dated March 26, 1968, discusses their long years of association with R.T. Greer & Company.¹¹

Data obtained from the firm's original Day Books indicates that R.T. Greer & Company established a national, as well as a world-wide market for the procurement and processing of a wide variety of organic products. While R.T. Greer procured commodities from over twenty states,¹² the distribution facet of the business extended internationally to Canada, China, Australia and over five European countries.¹³ "Greer was the first man in the world to collect and sell pollen commercially,"¹⁴ which directly impacted the national and world-wide pharmaceutical industry. "In one three-week period during pollenization, he (R.T. Greer) shipped \$42,000 worth of ragweed pollen to the big pharmaceutical houses, where it was converted into antigens and sold to doctors..."¹⁵ However, there is documentation that Greer & Company also sold directly to physicians and hospitals.¹⁶ Their vast quantity of local and national suppliers enabled the R.T. Greer and Company to become a leading international distributor of over 150 varieties of organic products. Company records reveal suppliers were both male and female, an indicator of womens' emergence from the traditional role of mother and housewife. By 1928, the western Virginia firm had become the largest dealer in botanical herbs in the nation.¹⁷

During the Great Depression, the Herb House is credited with saving many a small farm from foreclosure. To this day, local members of the community continue to reflect on this point and recall

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the difficult times when the Greer firm was their only means of survival. During the winter months when the herbal and pollen market decreased, Greer & Company continued to support the economy by purchasing furs, primarily from the local community. From the recorded volume of sales between 1934 and 1943,¹⁸ this market sustained a significant portion of the Appalachian community when other sources of cash during the Depression were extremely limited. With the money they received, families were able to pay their property taxes and often had enough left over for a special treat or some cloth to make clothes. The Herb House allowed the people of Appalachia to utilize their knowledge of mountain flora, turning this knowledge into profitable earnings.

Mr. Cecil R. Greer, son of G.W. Greer and manager of the Marion firm in 1938, stated "the business usually grossed between a quarter to half a million dollars per year."¹⁹ The collection of Day Books indicate a steady increase in the botanical market. However, with the development of penicillin and other pharmaceutical drugs, as well as the labor shift from the farm to inner city industries, the herbal market began to decline following World War II.

From 1968 through 1992, the R.T. Greer & Company building was empty. In 1979, the remaining Greer heirs sold the building to C.B. Gwyn. When Mr. Gwyn purchased the old building, he did so with the intention of tearing it down to make a parking lot for the car dealership which was located next door. However, after a closer inspection of this gracious old building with weathered timbers, aged bricks and oak plank floors, Brenda Gwyn persuaded C. B. Gwyn to preserve the Herb House. Many of the large interior beams are a canvas for graffiti, recording initials, names and messages from the turn of the century. The "ghost sign" on the north facade of the building is currently under negotiation for restoration. With the reopening of the R.T. Greer Herb House in July 1993, the property continues to promote Appalachian heritage by selling local crafts and herbs and giving classes for the community in the use of herbs.

Marion flourished through the enterprising spirit and forward thinking of merchants and local leaders, such as R.T. Greer, G.W. Greer and C.R. Greer. As well as being successful businessmen, these gentlemen served their community as mayors, council members and bank presidents. Mr. R.T. Greer was also a member of the War History Commission of Virginia.²⁰ At the turn of the twentieth century, as one of the largest suppliers of medicinal herbs in the country, R.T. Greer & Company continued in business longer than any other by adapting to changing times and needs. Recognition of the Herb House establishes a standard for the significance and integrity of a successful and pivotal commercial property, reflecting the history of Marion, Smyth County, as well as southwestern Virginia. The unique herb business exemplifies the strong desire of the Appalachian people for independence and self-sufficiency, principles dear to all Americans.

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Section 8 Page 6 R.T. Greer & Company Building, Smyth County, Virginia

ENDNOTES

1. R.T. Greer & Company Day Books, 1934-1944.
2. Clara Hill Carner, *Museum Society*, Smyth County News, (29 February 1968), 9.
3. June Johnson, *Images*, Appalachian News-Express, (20 December 1993), sec. B, 2.
4. Carner. *Museum Society*, Smyth County News, (29 February 1968), 9.
5. Goodridge Wilson. Smyth County History and Traditions (Tennessee: Kingsport Press, Inc. 1932), 307.
6. Smyth County Deed Book 44. (April 1916) 232.
7. Joan L. Armstrong and Mack H. Sturgill. Smyth County Tours, (Smyth County: Smyth County Chamber of Commerce. 1982) 5.
8. Wilson. Smyth County History and Traditions (Tennessee: Kingsport Press, Inc. 1932). 307.
9. Johnson. *Images*. Appalachian News-Express (20 December 1993), sec. B, 2.
10. Ibid. 10.
11. Erich Blembel. Hamburg, Germany, to Cecil R. Greer (26 March 1968). Transcript in hand of George W. Greer, III, Marion, Smyth County, VA.
12. R.T. Greer & Company Day Books, 1934-1944.
13. R.T. Greer & Company Salesman Order Books, 1930-1931.
14. Edwin J. Becker. *North Carolina's Pollen Merchant*, American Mercury (July 1954) 100.

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15. Bill Sharpe. *Ragweed Jungle Yields Profitable Crop*, Detroit News Pictorial (26 January 1942)
 16. Edwin J. Becker, *North Carolina's Pollen Merchant*, American Mercury (July 1954) 100.
 17. Johnson, *Images*, Appalachian News-Express, (20 December 1993), sec. B, 2.
 18. R.T. Greer & Company Day Books, 1934-1944.
 19. Carner, *Museum Society*, Smyth County News, (29 February 1968) 9.
 20. *R.T. Greer & Company: Collector of Crude Drugs*, Marion Democrat Marion News (1 May 1922) 6.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anderson, Flossie Jones. Interview by Brenda Gwyn (27 September 1991). Transcript in possession of interviewer.
- Armstrong, Joan L., and Mack H. Sturgill. Smyth County Tours. Smyth County, VA: Smyth County Chamber of Commerce. 1982.
- Becker, Edwin J. *North Carolina's Pollen Merchant*, American Mercury (July 1954) 100.
- Blembel, Erich, Hamburg Germany. Personal letter to C.R. Greer. (26 March 1968). Transcript in possession of George W. Greer, III. Marion, Smyth County, Virginia.
- Carner, Clara Hill. *Museum Society*. Smyth County News. Marion, VA. (29 February 1968).
- Guinn, Hartwell L.. Arthur Campbell Pioneer and Patriot of the 'Old Southwest'. North Carolina: McFarland and Co.. 1990.
- Johnson, June. *Images*. Appalachian News-Express. Pikeville, KY: (20 December 1993) B, 2.
- _____. *Images*. Appalachian News-Express. Pikeville, KY: (27 December 1993).
- R.T. Greer & Company, Collectors of Crude Drugs*. Marion Democrat Marion News. Marion, VA: (1 May 1922).
- R.T. Greer & Company Day Books. 1934-1944. Located on the premises. 107 Pendleton Street, Marion, Smyth County, VA.
- R.T. Greer & Company Draft Register Books. 1918-21; 1923-29; 1941-46. Located on the premises. 107 Pendleton Street, Marion, Smyth County, VA.
- R.T. Greer & Company Salesman Order Books. January 1930 - May 1931. Located on the premises. 107 Pendleton Street, Marion, Smyth County, VA.
- R.T. Greer Company Is Closing*. Smyth County News. Marion, VA: (4 January 1968).

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Sawyer, Thomas. Interview by Brenda Gwyn. (October 1993). Transcript in possession of interviewer.

Sharpe, Bill. *Ragweed Jungle Yields Profitable Crop*, Detroit News Pictorial (26 January 1942).

Smyth County, VA Census Records 1910-1920.

Smyth County, VA Deed Book 44. (April 1916): 232.

Smyth County, VA Deed Book 302 (February 1979): 425-428.

Smyth County, VA Town of Marion Tax Map No. 190-88-145.

Smyth County, VA Town of Marion Tax Tickets Card No. 123091.

Wilson, Goodridge. Smyth County History and Traditions. Tennessee: Kingsport Press, Inc. 1932.

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

BEGINNING at the northwest corner of property owned by Clayborne B. Gwyn. in the east line of Pendleton Street, thence north 82 1/4 east 10.66 poles to a stake, in the west line at an alley; thence with the said west line of said alley north 10 1/2 west 4.21 poles to a stake; thence with the center line of a private alley between this and Gwyn property south 85 west 9.94 poles to a stake in the east line of said Pendleton Street; thence with the east line of said street south 2 1/2 east 4.5 poles to the place of BEGINNING, containing 0.30 acres.

BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION

The boundary includes the property historically associated with the R.T. Greer & Company building since its construction.

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

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11. Form Prepared By

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