

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICENATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM

FOR NPS USE ONLY

RECEIVED

JUN 17 1975

DATE ENTERED

JUN 17 1975

SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS**1 NAME**

HISTORIC

Hotel Somerville / Dunbar Hotel

AND/OR COMMON

Dunbar Hotel, Dunbar Hotel Black Cultural and Historical Museum

2 LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER

4225 South Central Avenue

__ NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CITY, TOWN

Los Angeles

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

29th

STATE

CALIFORNIA

VICINITY OF

CODE
06

COUNTY

LOS Angeles

CODE

037

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: proposed museum**4 OWNER OF PROPERTY**

NAME

Mr. Bernard Johnson

STREET & NUMBER

4225 South Central Avenue

CITY, TOWN

Los Angeles 90011

VICINITY OF

STATE

California

5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTIONCOURTHOUSE,
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

Los Angeles County Hall of Records

STREET & NUMBER

227 N. Broadway

CITY, TOWN

Los Angeles

STATE

California

6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE

Historical-Cultural Monument Number 131

DATE

9/4/74

 FEDERAL STATE COUNTY LOCALDEPOSITORY FOR
SURVEY RECORDS

Los Angeles Cultural Heritage Board

CITY, TOWN

Los Angeles

STATE

California

7 DESCRIPTION

CONDITION		CHECK ONE	CHECK ONE
<input type="checkbox"/> EXCELLENT	<input type="checkbox"/> DETERIORATED	<input type="checkbox"/> UNALTERED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ORIGINAL SITE
<input type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> RUINS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ALTERED	<input type="checkbox"/> MOVED DATE _____
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> UNEXPOSED		

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The following article from the California Eagle newspaper of June 15, 1928, describes the hotel as it appeared upon completion:

"New Hotel Somerville Ready, Open June 23

Ready to be Thrown Open to the Public

"From spacious roof garden overlooking the whole city, to basement storerooms and trunk vaults, the new Somerville hotel is completed and ready for the public on June 23rd. It is built in the old Spanish hacienda style with a flag stone patio opening from 41st Street, near the middle of which plays a beautiful fountain built of colored mosaic tile.

"All the hundred or more rooms are planned so as to be able to make any two or more of them "en suite" with showers and tiled bath-tubs in all. A main dining room and mezzanine dining room seats 300 in addition to a smaller private dining room. Overlooking both dining room and lobby is an elaborately appointed ladies' lounge while the orchestra will play daily and nightly from a stand in the balcony."

The Dunbar Hotel opened in 1928 as the Hotel Somerville. Ground was broken early in 1928 for the construction of the 100 room hotel at the corner of 41st and Central in the heart of Los Angeles' Black community. Built entirely by Black contractors, laborers and craftsmen, and owned and financed by members of the Black community, the project was a milestone in the economic development of the area, expressing the solidarity of the Black community.

The building stands four stories tall, and includes a basement underneath. The ground floor is of cut stone, covered with stucco, while the upper three stories are of brown brick. The original design contained strong elements of Spanish Revival architecture, with semi-circular arched bays on the ground floor, small balconies over several doorways, and balconies on the 41st Street side of the fourth floor. The roofline was crowned with a parapet punctuated with several small "espadañas" reminiscent of earlier Mission Revival styling. Unfortunately, the balconies and parapet were removed in compliance with seismic codes, and the present roofline has been flattened.

The side entrance on 41st Street was surrounded by the Churrigueresque ornamentation so popular in Spanish Revival architecture. This entrance with its small interior patio, has now been closed off, and the original arch filled in with the doorway moved flush with the exterior walls of the building. The original ornamental metal lights still flank this former entrance.

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 type="checkbox"/> ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATION	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> ART	<input type="checkbox"/> ENGINEERING	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSIC	<input type="checkbox"/> THEATER
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCE	<input type="checkbox"/> EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> PHILOSOPHY	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNICATIONS	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRY	<input type="checkbox"/> POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY)
		<input type="checkbox"/> INVENTION		

SPECIFIC DATES 1928 (construction) BUILDER/ARCHITECT

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Dunbar Hotel is a building of rich cultural significance to the citizens of Los Angeles and in particular, the Black community. It was the first hotel built in America expressly for Black people at a time when lodging problems were common, consequently, almost every prominent Black businessman, politician, entertainer and athlete stayed at the hotel. It soon became the center for cultural, business and social gatherings.

On September 4, 1974, the Dunbar Hotel gained state-wide acclaim when the Los Angeles Cultural Heritage Board declared it historical-cultural monument number 131. Included in the motion naming of the building was an expression of feelings by members of the Board that the Dunbar Hotel, perhaps more than any other building in Southern California, symbolized for its era the advances made by Black Americans in California, and in particular, the Los Angeles area.

The hotel was built by Dr. John Alexander Somerville, a pioneer Black Los Angeles business, professional and cultural leader. He was born in Jamaica, British West Indies, came to California in 1902, and was the first Black graduate of the University of Southern California School of Dentistry. His wife, Dr. Vada Jetmore Somerville, also graduated from USC School of Dentistry.

Both were early and lifelong leaders in the community's fight against racial discrimination. The Somerville Hotel, which later gained prominence as the Dunbar Hotel, was a direct result of Dr. Somerville's own inability to find hotel or room space when he arrived in California from the West Indies.

The Somervilles also built the La Vada Apartments in 1927, and the combination of these two new modern buildings resulted in a new era of building and development on the City's East Side.

The hotel was completed in June, 1928, and was an immediate success, hosting in the same year the first national convention of the NAACP on the West Coast. It hosted several conventions of the like; art exhibits were common, and it became "the place to

9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

California Eagle (newspaper), Los Angeles, California, December 23, 1927
California Eagle, February 3, 1928
California Eagle, April 13, 1928
California Eagle, June 15, 1928
California Eagle, June 22, 1928

10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY 1/4 acre

UTM REFERENCES

A	1, 1	38, 4	0, 3, 0	3, 716, 3	4, 3, 0	B					
	ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING				ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING		
C						D					

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES

STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE

STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE

11 FORM PREPARED BY

Staff Revision by Office of Historic Preservation

NAME / TITLE

Bernard Johnson, Proprietor

October 14, 1975

ORGANIZATION

Dunbar Hotel Black Cultural and Historical Museum

DATE

STREET & NUMBER

4225 S. Central Avenue

TELEPHONE Area Code (213)

Bus. # 751-7338 Home # 671-7472

CITY OR TOWN

Los Angeles

STATE

California

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.

~~FEDERAL REPRESENTATIVE SIGNATURE~~

Robert Shael

TITLE

State Historic Preservation Officer

DATE

5 December 1975

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I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PROPERTY IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER

ATTEST

DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF ARCHAEOLOGY AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION

DATE

1/19/96

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

DATE

1-15-76

acting

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
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CONTINUATION SHEET

ITEM NUMBER 7 PAGE

The hotel contained both commercial and residential functions. The upper three stories were used for lodging, while the hotel's lobby shared the ground floor with commercial and professional offices. The hotel is no longer in operation, and most of the offices now stand vacant. A barber shop, bar and shoeshine stand still operate on the ground floor, but the large corner office occupied by the drugstore and lunch counter is vacant, and the windows are barred and painted over.

The main entrance to the hotel was on Central Avenue. The words "Hotel Somerville" can still be seen in mosaic tile in the floor of the entrance. The doorway opens into a spacious interior lobby, which contains high ceilings and an interior mezzanine around the lobby. The original ornamental metal light fixtures still remain suspended on chains from the ceiling, while an ornamental metal railing surrounds the mezzanine. The only major modifications in the lobby were the enlargement of the registration desk by extending a low partition several feet into the lobby, and the enclosure of the dining room on the mezzanine during the 1930's to provide additional office space. Murals, enclosed within three blind arches over the main entrance, depict scenes commonly associated with California and the southwest: a desert scene with cactus, a mountain scene with trees and a river, and a mission courtyard seen through an arcade. The murals remain in place, somewhat faded, with a portion of the mission scene having been covered with wall paint. Stenciled designs which once adorned the walls have also been painted over. All other period furnishings have been removed from the lobby, which now stands vacant.

The Dunbar Hotel is located on a commercial street (Central Avenue) just south of downtown Los Angeles in a major Black district of the city. Most of the buildings in the vicinity appear to be of 1920's vintage, and show signs of deterioration. Some stand vacant, but others are occupied by cafes, grocery and liquor stores, bail bond agencies and shoeshine parlors. The major intrusions in the neighborhood are a modern apartment building across the street from the hotel, and a new funeral home on the opposite corner. Wood frame and stucco bungalows line the side streets off of the business street. With the exception of the deterioration and the two modern structures described above, the immediate environment of the Dunbar Hotel still conveys the feeling of the setting contemporary with the hotel.

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CONTINUATION SHEET SIGNIFICANCE ITEM NUMBER 8 PAGE 2

stay when in L.A."

During the 30's, its nightclub had regular stage shows said to have given now-famous Black entertainers their start. Such noteables who performed or were guest at the hotel were:

Duke Ellington
 Count Basie
 Louis Armstrong
 Lionel Hampton
 Joe Louis
 Jack Johnson
 Sugar Ray Robinson
 Redd Foxx
 Sammy Davis, Jr.
 T-Bone Walker
 Fats Waller
 Billie Holiday
 Bessie Smith
 Roland Hayes
 Walter White
 Bill Robinson

W. E. B. Dubois
 Thurgood Marshall
 Paul Robeson
 Marian Anderson
 A. Phillip Randolph
 James Weldon Johnson
 J. A. Rodgers
 Cab Calloway
 Josephine Baker
 Adam Clayton Powell
 Langston Hughes
 Sojourner Truth ? (1918-1923)
 W. C. Handy
 Dr. Daniel H. Williams
 Arthur B. Spingarn

In the early 30's, the hotel was purchased by another prominent Black community leader, Lucius Lomax, and was then renamed the Dunbar Hotel.

Impetus for having the hotel named an historical-cultural monument came from officers and members of Our Authors Study Club which is the Los Angeles Branch of the Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History, and from the hotel's current owner, Mr. Bernard Johnson.

Future Plans of the Dunbar Hotel

The present owner and board of directors plan to establish and maintain a Black museum and cultural center which will gather and disseminate information relative to Black history, art and culture. To implement this plan the following objectives must be met.

1. To restore and maintain the original flavor of the Dunbar Hotel, which will house the museum and cultural center.

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CONTINUATION SHEET SIGNIFICANCE ITEM NUMBER 8 PAGE 3

2. To maintain a research and development center which will expand the field of knowledge relative to the historical/cultural perspectives and for further evaluation and projection related to the Black humanities.
3. To develop and maintain an oral-literate library which will centralize information related to Black historical/cultural ethnology.
4. To collaborate and nurture the cultural aspects of the Black experience developed through the culinary arts.
5. To assemble, display and recreate contributions made by Blacks to the growth and development of civilization.
6. To promote parity among people with participation in gathering, sharing, documenting, depositing and recording historical and sociocultural information.
7. To maintain a rotating gallery and display space for the purpose of displaying Black art created by Black masters.
8. To make available studio space for use by promising artists and musicians.
9. To maintain permanent display space to showcase multiple artistic forms donated to or acquired by the Dunbar Hotel Cultural and Historical Museum.
10. To sponsor and conduct workshops which will contribute to the growth and development of the participants in the fields of Black art, history and culture.
11. To be sensitive to the needs of the students in the museum and academic communities and offer tutorial assistance in the areas where they are needed.

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CONTINUATION SHEET SIGNIFICANCE ITEM NUMBER 8 PAGE 4

It is quite obvious that there is no one museum and cultural center in the country where a citizen may visit and have access to all information available on the contributions of Black people to American development in the humanities. It is our hope that the Dunbar Hotel can provide that facility.

ATTACHMENT

News Release from the Los Angeles Municipal
Arts Department, Sept. 6, 1974

DUNBAR HOTEL

The Dunbar Hotel, a building of rich cultural significance to the citizens of Los Angeles and in particular, the black community, was declared historic-cultural monument number 131 by the Los Angeles Cultural Heritage Board at its regular meeting on September 4, 1974.

Included in the motion naming the building was an expression of feeling by members of the Cultural Heritage Board that the Dunbar Hotel, perhaps more than any other building in Southern California, symbolized for its era the advances made by black Americans in Southern California, and in particular, the Los Angeles area.

The hotel, located at 4225 South Central Avenue, was built by Dr. John Alexander Somerville, a pioneer black Los Angeles business, professional, and cultural leader. Completed in 1928, it was originally called The Somerville Hotel.

Dr. Somerville was born in Jamaica, British West Indies, the son of an Episcopalian priest who was a graduate of Cambridge University, England. Dr. Somerville came to California in 1902 and worked his way through the University of Southern California, becoming the school's first black graduate and then, in 1907, the first black graduate of USC's School of Dentistry. His wife, Dr. Vada Jetmore Somerville, also graduated from USC's School of Dentistry in 1918.

Both were early and lifelong leaders in the community's fight against racial discrimination with the Dunbar Hotel among the most visible symbols of their success. According to Dr. Somerville's autobiography, it was the first hotel built in America specifically for Negroes and was a direct result of Dr. Somerville's own inability to find hotel or room space when he came to San Francisco from the West Indies.

The Somerville's also built the La Vada Apartments in 1927 and the combination of these two new, modern buildings resulted in a new era of building and development on the City's East side.

The hotel opened in June, 1928, and was an immediate success, hosting in that same year the first national convention of the NAACP on the West Coast.

Almost every prominent black entertainer and athlete stayed at the hotel during its first years and its nightclub, which during the 30's had regular stage shows, gave numerous now-famous black entertainers their start.

The hotel was purchased by another prominent black community leader, Lucius Lomax, in the early 1930's and was then renamed the Dunbar.

Impetus for having the hotel named an historic-cultural monument came from officers and members of Our Authors Study Club, which is the Los Angeles Branch of the Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History, and from the hotel's current owner, Bernard Johnson.

It is their hope to make the Dunbar Hotel an historic-cultural center for the black community.

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1974

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