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United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form

JUN 15 2005

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 Sears, Roebuck and Company Mail-Order Warehouse and Retail Store

other names/site number Midtown Exchange

2. Location

street & number 2929 Chicago Avenue South N/A not for publication

city or town Minneapolis N/A vicinity

state Minnesota code MN county Hennepin code 053 zip code 55407

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.)

Britta L. Bloomberg 6/10/05
Signature of certifying official Date

State or Federal agency and bureau Britta L. Bloomberg, Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer, Minnesota Historical Society

In my opinion, the 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

I hereby certify that this property is:

entered in the National Register.
 See continuation sheet.

determined eligible for the National Register.
 See continuation sheet.

determined not eligible for the National Register.

removed from the National Register.

other, (explain): _____

[Signature]
Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action
7/29/05

Sears, Roebuck and Company Mail-Order
Warehouse and Retail Store
Name of Property

Hennepin County, Minnesota
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		buildings
		sites
3		structure
		objects
4	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: department store and
warehouse

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

VACANT/NOT IN USE

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions)

MODERN MOVEMENT/Moderne

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation CONCRETE

walls BRICK

roof Unknown

other STONE: Limestone

Narrative Description

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

Sears, Roebuck and Company Mail-Order
Warehouse and Retail Store
Name of Property

Hennepin County, Minnesota
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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 a 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

Period of Significance

1927-1955

Significant Dates

1927

1928

1929

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

George Nimmons and Company

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. Project. No. 13532
- 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:

Minneapolis Public Library-Minneapolis History Collection

Name of Property

County and State

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property 7.5

Minneapolis South, Minn., 1967, Revised 1993

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

1.	<u>1</u> <u>5</u>	<u>4</u> <u>7</u> <u>9</u> <u>4</u> <u>1</u> <u>8</u>	<u>4</u> <u>9</u> <u>7</u> <u>7</u> <u>1</u> <u>3</u> <u>4</u>
	Zone	Easting	Northing
2.	<u> </u> <u> </u>	<u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u>	<u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u>
3.	<u> </u> <u> </u>	<u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u>	<u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u>
	Zone	Easting	Northing
4.	<u> </u> <u> </u>	<u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u>	<u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u>

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	<u>Elizabeth A. Gales and Charlene K. Roise (Garneth O. Peterson, Landscape Research, draft)</u>		
organization	<u>Hess, Roise and Company</u>	date	<u>February 2005</u>
street and number	<u>The Foster House, 100 North First Street</u>		telephone <u>612-338-1987</u>
city or town	<u>Minneapolis</u>	state <u>MN</u>	zip code <u>55401</u>

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 the SHPO or FPO.)

name	<u> </u>		
street & number	<u> </u>	telephone	<u> </u>
city or town	<u> </u>	state <u> </u>	zip code <u> </u>

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 the 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 Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503

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**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Sears, Roebuck and Company Mail-Order Warehouse and Retail Store

Name of property

Hennepin County, Minnesota

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Number of Resources within Property

The nominated property contains three contributing structures; the west parking lot and the Elliot and Tenth Avenue bridges. These bridges are also considered contributing structures in the Chicago Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad Grade Separation, a linear historic district located in Minneapolis, Hennepin County. This nomination was submitted to the National Register on April 12, 2005.

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Sears, Roebuck and Company Mail-Order Warehouse and Retail
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Description

The Sears, Roebuck and Company Mail-Order Warehouse and Retail Store is located at 2929 Chicago Avenue South in south Minneapolis. The original structure, dating from 1927-1928, covers an entire block bounded by Elliot Avenue South to the west, East Lake Street to the south, Tenth Avenue South to the east, and, to the north, a trench along the Twenty-ninth Street right-of-way that once held a double track of the Chicago, Milwaukee, and Saint Paul Railroad. Elliot Avenue is now vacated, but the Elliot Avenue and Tenth Avenue bridges continue to cross the railroad corridor. The convenient access to rail transport was essential for Sears's mail-order business. Most of the east half of the block between Elliot and Chicago Avenues was purchased by Sears in 1927 for a parking lot. Between 1929 and 1952, Sears expanded the parking lot west by acquiring parcels fronting on Chicago Avenue that were mostly occupied by two- to two-and-one-half-story residences. Within months after Sears acquired a property, any buildings on it were razed or moved and the parking lot was extended, with one exception: Lot 24, near the middle of the block, where Sears left a house standing until 1960. Sears created additional parking by buying most of the block east of the building in 1940. Again, houses were quickly removed and the area was dedicated to parking. The company's acquisitions also extended north, where major additions to the building occurred in 1964 and 1978.¹

The original building was designed by George C. Nimmons and Company of Chicago, which designed all of Sears's mail-order warehouses and retail stores from the Chicago headquarters complex in 1905-1906 to individual retail stores through the 1940s. The Minneapolis building dates from a flurry of national expansion by Sears in the late 1920s. Reflecting the influence of the Chicago School of architecture, the design is a straightforward, utilitarian version of what Nimmons called "Modern" architecture. Although Nimmons's earlier warehouses for Sears utilized Gothic detailing, the later warehouses, including the one in Minneapolis, feature bands of windows and smooth, unornamented wall surfaces typical of the Moderne style. The influence of the Art Deco style, popular in the 1920s, appears in the dominant vertical tower and the decorated entablatures surrounding the entrances.

The original Minneapolis building, a combination warehouse and retail store, has a footprint of 594 feet by 246 feet, covering approximately three acres. The building's defining element is a 211-foot-tall central tower measuring 84 feet by 72 feet in plan. A twelve-story warehouse is set

¹ Information on demolition is provided by building permits at the Building Inspections Division, City of Minneapolis Public Service Center; property acquisitions are documented in deed records at the Hennepin County Courthouse, Minneapolis.

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back from the tower. In addition to providing a strong vertical element for the 900,000-square-foot original building, the tower housed utilities and sprinkling apparatus. Large letters spelling out "Sears" were once affixed to the tower's parapet on each elevation, but were removed in 1995. The tower, visible at a great distance from many parts of the relatively flat metropolitan area, is defined by brick piers infilled with glazing, with a decorative limestone border at the top.

The building is of reinforced-concrete construction with a slab foundation and slab floors. It is faced in cream and tan brick laid in running bond with light mortar and trimmed with limestone. The principal Elliot Avenue facade consists of a series of recessed wall surfaces organized around the tower. The recessions break the otherwise monolithic wall treatment, which terminates in a plain parapet. The generally uniform fenestration consists of single-glazed, steel-sash windows in single, double, and triple configurations. Some of the windows have an operable section that pivots around a horizontal axis.

Ornamentation is primarily concentrated around an entrance bay at the base of the tower on Elliot Avenue. Two entryways each hold a modern metal framework with glass double doors, sidelights, and transoms. The entryways are surrounded by a three-story Bedford limestone composition that rises from a smooth stone base. Smooth and ribbed stone piers frame the recessed entries and second- and third-story windows. The slender ribbing in the piers consists of reeds and incised panels. Surmounting the third-story windows are pressed limestone low-relief spandrel panels with double rosette motifs set into foliate beds. Set back from the projecting entry at the tower base is another composition consisting of stylized pelicans carved in a heraldic motif above geometric and foliate low-relief beds. This central element is flanked by a composition of four prominent Egyptianate geometric motifs, each set in a spandrel panel framed by stylized balls and diamonds.

A less elaborate version of the treatment of the main entry is repeated at the retail store entrances south of the tower on Elliot Avenue and on Lake Street. Both entries have "Sears, Roebuck and Co. Retail Store" carved in a limestone panel above, and are flanked by limestone and brick piers surmounted by stone panels, each containing a low-relief rosette or foliate design. Since the store's closing, the words "Sears, Roebuck and Co." in each panel have been covered. Display windows (now boarded over) line the street level on each side of the central Lake Street entrance; they were once trimmed with fabric awnings. The same window pattern continues for one bay on the west and east facades.

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The Tenth Avenue South facade, although clearly the rear of the building, continues the vertical arrangement of window openings visible on the west and south facades of the original warehouse. The south retail wing has a simple entrance sheltered by a shallow, flat metal roof.

A year after opening, the building was expanded with a six-story addition totaling almost 200,000 square feet. The addition was constructed on the existing three-story north wing, bringing that portion of the building up to nine stories. Featuring reinforced-concrete frame and brick walls trimmed with limestone, the 1929 addition blends seamlessly with the original design.

As part of the original construction, an attached train shed was built in the depressed railroad corridor north of the building. To accommodate the train shed, the south abutment of the Tenth Avenue bridge had to be relocated further south. When the train shed was extended to the west in the early 1930s, the south abutment of the Elliot Avenue bridge was also moved south. In both cases, structural elements of the train shed were integrated with structural elements of the reinforced-concrete, deck-girder bridges, including the reinforced-concrete abutments. Today, three segmental-arched spans of each bridge cross the railroad corridor. The remaining two spans of the Elliot Avenue bridge and one span of the Tenth Avenue bridge are incorporated into the train shed. The main span of each bridge measures 31.5 feet. The total length of the Elliot Avenue bridge is 111 feet; the Tenth Avenue bridge is 114.3 feet long. Their decks are 51 feet wide. The roadway over the Elliot Avenue bridge is 31.5 feet wide flanked by 8.3-foot sidewalks. The Tenth Avenue bridge has a 32-foot-wide roadway flanked by 8-foot sidewalks. Monolithic reinforced-concrete railings edging the deck have recessed, molded panels and a tapered cap. Plain pilasters between the panels align with bridge piers and abutments. The reinforced-concrete piers supporting the exposed spans have four square-section columns separated by arched openings.

Subsequent additions date from after the period of significance. In 1964, a five-story windowless warehouse was attached to the north wall of the building. Measuring 145 feet by 245 feet, the addition increased the facility by 214,050 square feet. It spanned the rail corridor, occupying air rights that Sears acquired from the railroad. A double-leaf door sheltered with a flat metal canopy provided access to the warehouse on the west facade. This addition has since been demolished, separating the original building from another addition north of the 1964 warehouse that dates from 1978-1979 and is not included in this nomination.

In 1966, the pre-cast concrete roof of the south wing was raised to add a fourth story. Set back from the facade below, this story had no windows. The cream brick facade projects at intervals,

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echoing the pilasters between windows openings on the floors below. The roof is edged by a simple parapet covered with metal coping.

The west parking lot, established during the period of significance, was the main lot used by retail customers. It is included in the property boundaries because of its importance to the building's commercial use. The east parking lot, which was also acquired during the period of significance, was used primarily for employee parking. Its integrity has been compromised by development, and it is not included in the boundaries for this nomination.

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Statement of Significance

The Sears, Roebuck and Company Mail-Order Warehouse and Retail Store in Minneapolis is eligible for the National Register under Criterion A for its statewide significance in Commerce. It reflects the historical patterns identified in the Minnesota historic context "Urban Centers, 1870-1940." The 1927-1928 construction represents an important phase in the development of one of America's major retailers, during which Sears changed the way it served customers and located facilities. The Minneapolis complex was among the last of the mail-order warehouses Sears built during an expansion campaign in the 1920s. It housed a distribution center for the mail-order business, the company's initial enterprise, as well as an early retail store. Sears's policy of siting stores outside of the central business district marked a turning point in the world of retailing. The location on Lake Street in Minneapolis in the 1920s was a precursor to the suburban malls that would begin to dominate retailing four decades later. While the property was served by streetcar lines, the importance of automobile transportation was acknowledged by Sears's acquisition of land for a parking lot west of the building. The enlargement of parking areas and substantial expansion of the building during the period of significance (1927-1954) reflected the company's response to economic and social changes as the twentieth century progressed.

Discussion of Significance

The History of Sears, Roebuck and Company

Sears, Roebuck and Company became the world's largest retailer by the 1960s. When Sears built its Minneapolis facility, however, the company was just diversifying into retailing after establishing a successful mail-order operation. This evolution provides the context for evaluating the significance of the Minneapolis property.

The company was launched in North Redwood, Minnesota, by Richard Warren Sears, who managed the local railroad and express offices. In 1886, when a local jeweler refused a shipment of watches that Sears had delivered, the young entrepreneur seized the opportunity and sold the watches himself. Sears began regularly purchasing watches for retail sale. The R. W. Sears

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Watch Company moved first to Minneapolis and then, early in 1887, to Chicago. Sears searched for a watchmaker to handle repairs, hiring Alvah Curtis Roebuck from Indiana as his partner.¹

Sears sold the company in 1889, but within a year was back in Minneapolis, operating a watch business called the Warren Company from the sixth floor of the Globe Building. Sears rehired Roebuck, and by 1890 had about twenty employees. The company name was changed to A. C. Roebuck by 1891, and to Sears, Roebuck and Company two years later. Fascinated by advertising and sales pitches that appealed to farmers, Richard Sears created an 80-page catalog filled with watches and jewelry, including pages of testimonials from satisfied customers. The firm soon expanded its offerings: the 322-page catalogue issued in 1894 included silverware, firearms and ammunition, sewing machines, bicycles, boys' and men's clothing, musical instruments, and sports equipment. Payment was cash-on-delivery.²

In building the company, Richard Sears took advantage of contemporary business trends, particularly the growth of consumer capitalism as an emerging mainstay of the American economy. The Industrial Revolution and the urbanization of the population produced a substantial middle class for the first time in the nation's history. Characterized by disposable income and unprecedented leisure time, the American consumer was born. Entrepreneurs responded with a landslide of newly improved goods, marketed with increasing sophistication. Mail-order businesses, almost 1,200 in number by the end of the nineteenth century, were important players in the new commercialism.³

Sears, Roebuck and Company quickly distinguished itself from the competition. A branch office established in Chicago in late 1893 soon surpassed the Minneapolis location, prompting the company to relocate its headquarters to a five-story building on West Adams Street in Chicago in January 1895. Roebuck sold his interest in the company within the year, and Chicago businessman Aaron E. Nusbaum and his brother-in-law, Julius Rosenwald, became equal partners. It was Rosenwald, a moderately successful clothing merchant, whose leadership propelled Sears, Roebuck and Company into prominence in the early twentieth century.

¹ "\$5,000,000 Sears, Roebuck Plant to Open," *Minneapolis Evening Tribune*, February 29, 1928; Boris Emmet and John Jeuck, *Catalogues and Counter: A History of Sears, Roebuck and Company* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950), 26-28.

² "\$5,000,000 Sears, Roebuck Plant to Open"; Emmet and Jeuck, 30-38.

³ See William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), for a complete discussion of the impact of department stores and consumerism.

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Rosenwald continued to run the company after Nusbaum cashed out in 1901 and Richard Sears retired in 1909.⁴

Rosenwald built the giant \$5 million Sears headquarters on Homan Avenue, five miles west of downtown Chicago, in 1905-1906. Sears became a public company in 1906 and prospered, with sales volume increasing from \$10 million in 1900 to \$50 million in 1907 and \$235 million by 1920. Under Rosenwald's leadership, the company first established branch mail-order plants in Dallas in 1906, Seattle in 1910, and Philadelphia in 1920.⁵

In 1924 Rosenwald hired General Robert E. Wood, whose military experience in mass procurements and large-scale organization guided the expansion of Sears over the next four decades. Wood recognized the shift in the American population, predominantly urban for the first time in 1920, and the rising number of automobile registrations, trends that significantly impacted the mail-order business and the location of retail stores. As vice president for factories and retail stores, Wood not only built additional mail-order warehouses, but also developed the retail stores that formed the basis of Sears's future. He established a policy of siting retail stores outside of downtown business districts, where the company could purchase adequate land for convenient customer parking. Wood served as president of the firm from 1928 until his retirement in 1954, continuing as chairman of the board for another decade.⁶

The first Sears retail outlet opened in the Chicago mail-order plant in 1925, quickly followed by seven more stores that year. Four—Seattle, Dallas, Philadelphia, and Kansas City—were located in mail-order plants. In the first year of operation, retail store sales totaled \$11 million, about 4.5 percent of the company's gross sales. A year later, with the addition of only one retail store in a mail-order plant in Atlanta, the combined retail sales doubled in dollar volume and achieved 8.5 percent of the company's sales, a trend that continued for the next fifteen years.⁷

Sears built mail-order plants in Memphis and Los Angeles in 1926 and five more free-standing retail stores in 1927, bringing the number of retail stores to twenty-seven. In 1928, the year the Minneapolis plant opened, Sears launched more than six times as many stores as in the previous three years combined. Minneapolis was one of two mail-order plants constructed; the other was in Boston. The number of retail stores grew to 192 with sales of over \$107 million,

⁴ Emmet and Jeuck, 38, 47-58.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ James C. Worthy, *Shaping an American Institution: Robert E. Wood and Sears, Roebuck* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 3-18, 59; Emmet and Jeuck, 339-341.

⁷ Emmet and Jeuck, 341-342.

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approximately 30 percent of the company's gross, a massive growth for a division that had not even existed four years earlier.⁸

By 1964, Sears had overtaken the Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company (A & P) grocery chain as the world's largest retailer. In 1973, Sears's 837 retail stores, 12 catalog plants, and 2,647 catalog and telephone sales offices reported total sales of almost \$11 billion. At that time, catalog sales accounted for only 22 percent of Sears's total business. In 1974, Sears moved its headquarters to the one hundred-story Sears Tower at 233 South Wacker Drive in downtown Chicago.

Sears began losing market share by the mid-1970s and recovered slowly after a recession during that period. As America shifted from a manufacturing to a service economy, Sears diversified. The company purchased Allstate Insurance and Homart Development Corporation (for its shopping center projects) in the 1950s, and acquired investment house Dean Witter Reynolds and Coldwell Banker, the nation's largest real estate firm, in 1981. The scale of the company's restructuring in the late twentieth century was symbolized by the termination of its hallmark catalog in the 1990s and by relocation of its headquarters from the landmark skyscraper in downtown Chicago to suburban Hoffman Estates, Illinois.⁹

The Minneapolis Sears Store

The intersection of Lake Street and Chicago Avenue was a radical choice for the location of a large retail store in the 1920s. Major department stores were traditionally downtown, while corridors such as Lake and Chicago generally offered groceries, drug stores, laundries, and other convenience goods and services. General Wood's insistence that Sears locate where land was less expensive, permitting acquisition of property for parking as well as a store, was remarkably forward-thinking for the time. Sears was an early prototype for today's "big box" retailers like Wal-Mart, K-Mart, and Target. The Sears buildings differed from their modern-day counterparts, however, in their commanding presence. The trademark Sears tower announced the store throughout the flat plain of South Minneapolis, while the size of the warehouse reinforced the monumentality of the operation. The impact of this massive building was greater than it would have been downtown because of its visibility in an area of low-scale buildings.

⁸ Ibid., 342-344.

⁹ Ralph J. Christian, "Sears, Roebuck and Company Complex," National Register of Historic Places Inventory-Nomination Form, History section (1975?); Wiss, Janney, Elstner Associates, "Sears, Roebuck and Company Mail Order Plant," Historic American Building Survey (HABS) No. IL-1187, April 1994; Worthy, 261-268.

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The building was designed by the Chicago architectural firm George C. Nimmons and Company, which was one of the most prolific industrial architecture firms in the country. The firm's principal, George C. Nimmons, was born in Wooster, Ohio, in 1865, and educated at a local academy before studying in Europe. At the age of eighteen he took a draftsman position with Burnham and Root in Chicago. Nimmons formed a partnership with William K. Fellows in 1897, which lasted until 1910. After separating from Fellows, Nimmons established his self-named company. During the next two decades, he became known for designing Sears buildings and for writing numerous articles on industrial building design and its impact on workers. He also created the first freestanding retail stores for Sears, and continued to work for the company throughout the 1930s. The Sears towers designed by Nimmons provided a trademark and a prominent visual identity for the company in Minneapolis and other cities in the United States.¹⁰

Lake Street (the equivalent of Thirtieth Street) and Elliot Avenue (one block east of Chicago Avenue, a major north-south artery) was a good fit for the company's locational requirements. In 1884, the Chicago, Milwaukee, Saint Paul and Pacific Railroad was constructed just north of Twenty-ninth Street, creating a potential industrial corridor for south Minneapolis. By the end of that decade a new bridge connected Lake Street with Marshall Avenue in Saint Paul, setting the stage for Lake to become a heavily traveled road.¹¹ The Twin City Rapid Transit Company reinforced the bridge in 1905-1906 to carry a newly laid line on Lake and Marshall, the third streetcar route to connect the Twin Cities.¹² Lake Street was the only east-west line that completely traversed south Minneapolis and continued to Saint Paul, providing transfer points with at least ten north-south car lines. Commercial nodes developed at a number of these intersections, including Hennepin, Blaisdell, Chicago, and Bloomington Avenues, by the 1920s.¹³ The convenient streetcar connections and adjacent railroad corridor, a requirement for a busy mail-order business, attracted Sears to the corner of Lake and Chicago.¹⁴ The site and good local roads ensured that automobile drivers could easily reach the area, and the Lake Street bridge provided access from Saint Paul and points east.

¹⁰ Henry F. Withey and Elsie Rathburn Withey, *Biographical Dictionary of American Architects (Deceased)* (Los Angeles: Hennessey and Ingalls, 1970), 442; Carl W. Condit, *The Chicago School of Architecture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 179-180. George C. Nimmons and Company existed from 1917 to 1933, when Nimmons became the senior partner of the firm Nimmons, Carr and Wright.

¹¹ See the Sanborn and plat maps in the Minneapolis History Collection, Minneapolis Public Library, 1885, 1903, 1914; Russell L. Olson, *The Electric Railways of Minnesota* (Hopkins, Minn.: Minnesota Transportation Museum, 1976); "Propose New River Bridge," *Minneapolis Journal*, October 13, 1935.

¹² *Ibid.* See also John R. Borchert, et al., *Legacy of Minneapolis: Preservation Amid Change* (Minneapolis: Voyager Press, 1983), for a discussion of neighborhood development.

¹³ *Ibid.*; "West Side Is Happy As New Lights Flash," *Minneapolis Tribune*, January 1, 1914.

¹⁴ *Minneapolis Evening Tribune*, February 29, 1928; Worthy, 59-60, 82-83.

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Sears was lured to Minneapolis by a public-private collaboration. The company's competitor in the mail-order business, Montgomery Ward and Company, was already established in the Twin Cities market. A fierce battle between Minneapolis and Saint Paul to attract that mail-order retailer had ended in January 1920, when Ward's announced plans to locate its new "Northwest House" along University Avenue in Saint Paul's Midway District. The company's 1.2 million-square-foot warehouse and retail store, designed by Lockwood Green and Company of Chicago, was constructed of reinforced concrete and crowned by a 257-foot landmark tower housing a water tank for the building's sprinkler system. The company filled more than 25,000 mail orders a day in the mid-1920s, necessitating an addition to the warehouse's east wing in 1925. With twenty-seven acres under roof, the Saint Paul mail-order house was the company's third largest, behind only Chicago and Kansas City.¹⁵

The failure to capture the Ward's store must have been on the minds of Minneapolis business leaders in their efforts to attract Sears. In 1925, Alderman Hosmer A. Brown, chair of the Greater Minneapolis Committee of the city council, invited Sears officials to visit the community and assured them of the city government's full cooperation in establishing a store there. The Minneapolis Civic and Commerce Association aided Sears with preliminary arrangements for property acquisition.¹⁶

In late March 1927, newspaper headlines announced that Sears would build a mail-order warehouse and retail store on a four-and-one-half-acre site at Lake Street and Elliot Avenue. The twelve-story, one-million-square-foot facility would employ 1,700 people with an annual payroll of \$4 million. Undertaken as part of Sears's major expansion program in the late 1920s, the Minneapolis warehouse would accommodate 800,000 mail-order customers in the Dakotas, Montana, and Minnesota, and parts of Iowa, Wisconsin, and Michigan, areas previously served by the Chicago and Kansas City warehouses.¹⁷

Minneapolis city officials approved all regulatory requirements for the Sears building within six hours of Sears's announcement. The planning commission and city council granted a variance to allow a twelve-story building in a zoning district with a height restriction of six stories, and a

¹⁵ Larry Millet, "Retail Requiem," *Saint Paul Pioneer Press*, April 13, 1995. The massive Ward's building was razed in 1995; a new Ward's store that anchored the shopping center subsequently developed on the site closed in 1998.

¹⁶ Much of the information for the following section was provided by unattributed newspaper clippings in the Sears, Roebuck and Company vertical file of the Minneapolis History Collection, Minneapolis Public Library (hereafter cited as MHC-MPL); see March 26 and 27, 1927.

¹⁷ MHC-MHL, March 25, 1927 and March 1, 1928.

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nonstandard setback to accommodate future widening of Lake Street from eighty to one hundred feet. Twenty-ninth Street was vacated between Tenth and Chicago to provide direct access to the Milwaukee Railroad tracks. The building would fill the entire block between Tenth and Elliot Avenues, Lake Street, and the railroad corridor. Almost the entire east half of the block between Elliot and Chicago was acquired for an automobile parking lot.¹⁸

For months in advance of Sears's announcement, an agent had negotiated the purchase of forty-three properties, primarily occupied by residences, with thirty-nine separate owners. To initiate construction in May 1927, most of the buildings were demolished, although several houses were moved. Excavation of 200,000 cubic yards of dirt began in June and was completed by late July. The concrete foundation was finished in August, and the concrete structure rose to full height by November. With construction continuing twenty-four hours a day, exterior brickwork was finished in late January 1928. The new store opened with great ceremony on March 1, less than a year after Sears had announced its plans.¹⁹

The mail-order business found instant success, prompting the company to construct a new 200,000 square-foot, six-story addition to the warehouse in 1929. The addition was atop the existing three stories of the building's north wing, increasing its height to nine floors. Sears also erected an auto service store and gas station on the south end of the parking lot. The growing importance of cars in American life prompted Sears to acquire additional parking areas in subsequent years, beginning in 1929 with three lots on Chicago Avenue just north of a cluster of commercial buildings at the Chicago-Lake intersection. In 1940, Sears purchased two-thirds of the block across Tenth Avenue to the east. Finally, between 1946 and 1952, Sears bought the remaining lots along Chicago between its 1929 acquisitions and the railroad corridor. With the exception of one lot on Chicago, where a house remained until 1960, Sears quickly removed the buildings on property it acquired and made utilitarian improvements to create more parking space.²⁰

The strong market in the Twin Cities led Sears to open branch stores at West Broadway and Fremont Avenue North in 1930, and at 421 East Hennepin in 1935. By 1965, Sears had fourteen stores in the metro area, including one across the street from the state capitol in Saint Paul, dating from 1963. The mail-order business also prospered, justifying the construction of a five-story addition to the Lake Street warehouse in 1964 that crossed the railroad tracks to the north.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ MHC-MPL, March 20, 1929 and October 12, 1929.

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This addition freed up space for the retail store, which doubled in size to 150,000 square feet. In 1978, Sears announced plans for another extension of the warehouse to the north.²¹

By this time, the neighborhood was declining economically. As early as the 1960s, the community had worried that Sears might abandon its urban flagship and move to the suburbs. Instead, the company kept its Lake Street location and established new stores in a second generation of regional shopping malls, such as Burnsville Center, Maplewood Mall, Eden Prairie Center, and Ridgedale, in the early 1970s. In the 1990s, Sears signed on as one of four anchor stores in the giant Mall of America in Bloomington. In that decade, however, a business slump for the corporation and socio-economic transitions in the Chicago-Lake neighborhood worked against the 1920s facility. The Minneapolis catalog distribution center closed in 1990, and Sears completely discontinued its catalog operation three years later. The Lake Street building was offered for sale by the late 1980s, but no development proposals were successful. The retail store closed in December 1994. The building is currently undergoing a substantial rehabilitation for office, housing, and retail use.²²

The Minneapolis Sears, Roebuck and Company Mail-Order Warehouse and Retail Store admirably served its functions for over six decades. Its outlying location foreshadowed the development of suburban malls, while the provision of free parking recognized the trend of increased automobile ownership by its customers. The prominent tower of the massive facility was a concrete symbol reinforcing the image of the retailer and constantly advertising its presence. Still dominating the local skyline today, the building is a testimony to the evolution of one of America's most prominent retailers during the twentieth century. As a result, the property merits National Register designation under Criterion A for its statewide significance in Commerce. The building is also in the Minnesota historic context "Urban Centers, 1870-1940."

²¹ MHC-MPL, Sears vertical file; Minneapolis building permits.

²² MHC-MPL, Sears vertical file.

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Verbal Boundary Description

The property consists of:

- In Block 3, Allan and Anderson's Second Addition to Minneapolis:
 - Lots 1, 2, 25, and 28; and
 - Lots 3 through 24 inclusive; and
 - Lots 26 and 27; and
 - That part of the vacated alley, which lies East of the centerline thereof and between the Westerly extensions of the North line of said Lot 1 and the South line at said Lot 2; and
 - That part of the vacated alley, which lies West of the centerline thereof and between the Easterly extensions of the North and the South lines of said Lot 25; and
 - That part of the vacated alley which lies West of the centerline thereof and between the Easterly extensions of the North and the South lines of said Lot 28; and
 - That part of the vacated Elliot Avenue South, dedicated in the plat as 9th Avenue South, which lies East of the centerline thereof and between the Westerly extensions of the North and South lines of Lot 25; and
 - That part of vacated 29th Street East lying between the extensions across it of the east line of said Lot 1 and the West line of said Lot 28; and
 - That part of the East ½ of vacated Elliot Avenue South, dedicated in the plat of Allan & Anderson's Second Addition to Minneapolis as 9th Avenue South lying South of the North line of said plat (being the North line of the South ½ of the Southeast Quarter of the Southwest Quarter, Section 35, Township 29, Range 24) and North of the Westerly extension of the South line of said Lot 28; and
 - That part of the East Half of vacated Elliot Avenue South, dedicated in said plat as 9th Avenue South, lying between the westerly extensions of the South line of said Lot 17 and of the North line of said Lot 24; and
 - That part of the East Half of vacated Elliot Avenue South, dedicated in said plat as 9th Avenue South, lying between the westerly extensions of the South line of said Lot 26 and of the North line of said Lot 27; and
 - That part of the vacated alley in said Block 3 abutting said Lots 11 through 18 inclusive, which lies South of the most southerly line of said Lot 11 and the North line of said Lot 3; and
 - That part of the West Half of the vacated alley in said Block 3 lying South of the easterly extension of the North line of said Lot 24 and North of the westerly extension of the most southerly line of said Lot 11; and

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-
- That part of the West Half of vacated alley in said Block 3 lying between the easterly extensions of the south line of said Lot 26 and of the North line of said Lot 27.
 - In Block 4, Allan and Anderson's Second Addition to Minneapolis:
 - Lots 1 through 13 inclusive; and
 - Lots 19 through 28 inclusive; and
 - That part of the West Half of vacated Elliot Avenue South, dedicated in the plat as 9th Avenue South, lying South of the North line of said plat, and North of the Easterly extension of the South line of said Lot 12; and
 - That part of vacated East 29th Street, dedicated in said plat, lying between the Northerly extensions of the East line and of the West line of said Block 4; and
 - That part of vacated alley in said Block 4 lying between the easterly extensions of the North line of said Lot 28 and the Easterly extension of a line parallel with and 9 feet southerly, as measured at right angles, from the South line of said Lot 22; and
 - That part of the North Half of vacated alley in said Block 4, lying between the southerly extensions of the East line and of the most westerly line of said Lot 11; and
 - That part of the South Half of vacated alley in said Block 4 lying between the northerly extensions of the West line of said Lot 13 and the East line of said Lot 12.
 - The south 21.15 feet of that part of the North One-half of the Southeast Quarter of the Southwest Quarter of Section 35, Township 29, Range 24, lying South of the South line of Block 3, Avery's Chicago Avenue Addition to Minneapolis and between the extensions South of the East and West lines of said Block 3.
 - The eastern 153.2 feet of the south 21.15 feet of that part of the North Half of the Southeast Quarter of the Southwest Quarter, Section 35, Township 29, Range 24, lying South of the South line of the plat of Avery's Chicago Avenue Addition to Minneapolis which lies between the Southerly extensions of the West line of Block 4, said plat, and of the West line of Block 3 of said plat.
 - The western 75 feet of the south 21.15 feet of that part of the North Half of the Southeast Quarter of the Southwest Quarter, Section 35, Township 29, Range 24, lying South of the South line of the plat of Avery's Chicago Avenue Addition to Minneapolis which lies between the Southerly extensions of the East line of Block 3, said plat, and of the centerline of the north-south alley in Block 1, Allan & Anderson's Second Addition to Minneapolis.

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-
- That certain five-span reinforced-concrete bridge, approximately 134.5 feet in length commonly known as Railroad Bridge O-1530 in the City of Minneapolis, Hennepin County, Minnesota, across the former right-of-way of the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific Railroad Company and connecting that portion of Elliot Avenue (now vacated) lying South of East 28th Street and between Blocks 3 and 4, Avery's Chicago Avenue Addition, with that portion of Elliot Avenue (now vacated) lying North of East Lake Street and between Blocks 3 and 4, Allan and Anderson's Second Addition.
 - That certain five-span reinforced-concrete bridge, approximately 137.8 feet in length commonly known as Bridge L8915 in the City of Minneapolis, Hennepin County, Minnesota, across the former right-of-way of the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific Railroad Company and connecting that portion of Tenth Avenue lying South of East 28th Street and between Blocks 2 and 3, Avery's Chicago Avenue Addition, with that portion of Tenth Avenue lying north of East Lake Street and between Blocks 2 and 3, Allan and Anderson's Second Addition.

Boundary Justification

This boundary includes the Sears building; two bridges (one vacated) that became physically linked with the building during the period of significance; and the west parking lot, the building's first parking lot and the primary lot during the period of significance. The verbal descriptions for the bridges are based on measurements provided by the Minnesota Department of Transportation. The boundary includes the superstructure and substructure of each bridge.

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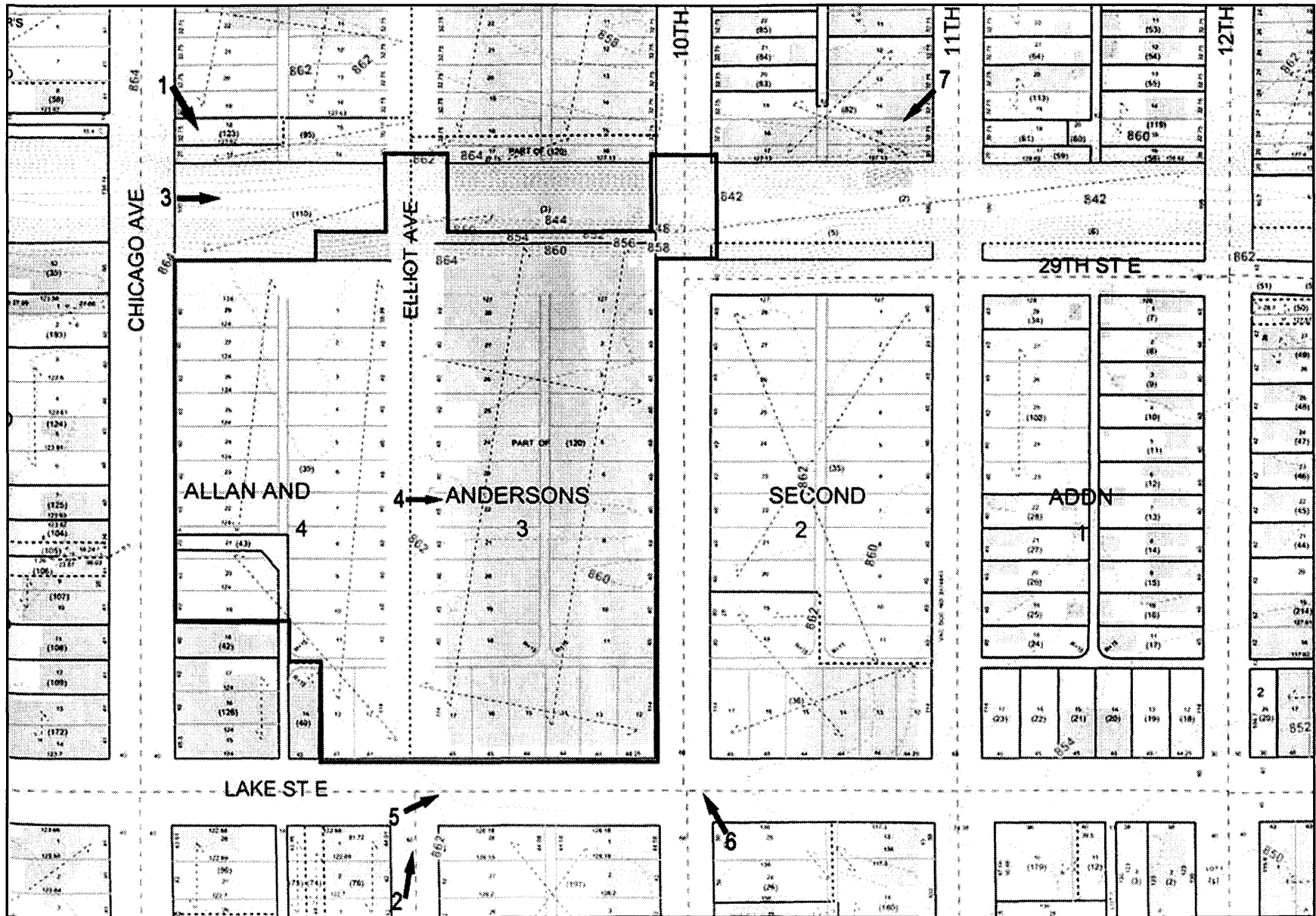
Photographer: Elizabeth A. Gales, Hess, Roise and Company

Date: June 16, 2004 and March 17, 2005

Negatives: Hess, Roise and Company, Minneapolis

- 1 West facade. View to southeast
- 2 West facade. View to northeast.
- 3 West facade of train shed and rail corridor. View to east.
- 4 West facade. Main entrance. View to east. (to be included in final submittal)
- 5 South facade. View to northeast.
- 6 East facade. View to northwest.
- 7 East facade. View to southwest.

Sears, Roebuck and Company
2929 Chicago Avenue South, Minneapolis, Minnesota
Boundary Map



Map shows angles for photographs (Please see Index to Photographs)