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United States Department of the Interior National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

AUG 30 1994

B-2371

INTERAGENCY RESOURCES DIVISION NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "X" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, styles, materials, and areas of significance, enter only the categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900a). Type all entries.

1. Name of Property

historic name ROMBRO BUILDING

other names/site number

2. Location

street & number 22-24 South Howard Street N/A not for publication
city, town Baltimore N/A vicinity
state Maryland code MD county Independent City code 510 zip code 21201

3. Classification

Ownership of Property

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

Category of Property

- X building(s)
district
site
structure
object

Number of Resources within Property

Table with 2 columns: Contributing, Noncontributing. Rows for buildings, sites, structures, objects, Total.

Name of related multiple property listing: Cast Iron Architecture of Baltimore, Maryland, 1850-1904

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

4. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination X 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 X meets does not meet the National Register criteria. See continuation sheet. Signature of certifying official STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER Date 8/25/94

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. See continuation sheet. Signature of commenting or other official Date State or Federal agency and bureau

5. 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 of the Keeper Patrick Andrews Date of Action 10/13/94

6. Function or Use

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Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)

COMMERCE/TRADE/warehouse

INDUSTRY/PROCESSING/EXTRACTION/manufacturing facility

Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)

VACANT/work in progress

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(enter categories from instructions)

QUEEN ANNE

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation BRICK

walls IRON

BRICK

roof ASPHALT

other WOOD

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

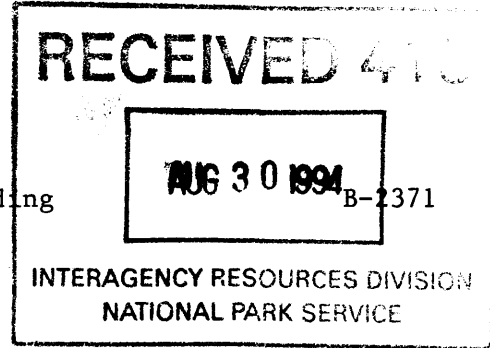
DESCRIPTION SUMMARY:

The Rombro Building is a six-story loft building constructed in 1881, located at the northwest corner of South Howard Street and Cider Alley in downtown Baltimore, Maryland. The building reflects the influence of the Queen Anne style in its facade organization and detailing; it incorporates brick, stone, terra cotta, and cast iron elements. The first floor facade features cast iron columns. The building retains good architectural integrity; the storefront retains most of its important cast-iron elements, and the upper floors are essentially unchanged.

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GENERAL DESCRIPTION:

The Rombro Building is located on the northwest corner of South Howard Street and Cider Alley, facing east. It is six stories high, with a basement and shed roof, and measures 51'2" x 106'. The detached structure was designed as a double warehouse. However, there are no walls dividing the upper floors, merely a row of columns running lengthwise down the center of the open loft space. Until fairly recently, the building was occupied by only one major tenant at a time. Two stone plaques near the top of the facade identify it as the Rombro Building, and small stone panels between the fifth and sixth stories carry numerals designating the date of construction: 1881.

The Rombro Building is eight bays wide. The facade is divided in half by a central brick pier and pilaster running the full height of the structure that matches the two at the corners. It is further subdivided by four rows of columns, so that the window pattern across the entire face of the building (on floors two through five), reads 1:2:1--1:2:1. The deeply-modelled facade has traces of the Queen Anne style in the heavy, projecting dormer-like sixth floor, and in the treatment of the windows. The materials are brick, stone, terra cotta, and cast iron for the framing of the first floor storefronts.

Only one of the eight iron columns is fully visible, at the far right corner, where it abuts the brick pier. The column itself is relatively short and plain with a heavy, petal-like capital; it is enclosed in a high base, and continues within an unadorned rectangular section above the capital. The bases of the other columns can be seen projecting from the sheathing that covers the ground floor exterior. One of these is broken, exposing the round structural column underneath; the cast iron casing is here a quarter-inch thick. Another bears a casting mark: "Variety Iron Works, No. 4 Light St[reet], Baltimore, Md."

The undecorated iron beams these columns support are also 24" deep. Their full depth is revealed only in the small portion visible over the entrance at the north corner of the building. However, the beams' dentilled cornices can be seen extending beyond the false front.

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The structure is similar to that of the Johnston Building on the south side of Cider Alley; that is, each of the columns is attached to a three-sided metal casing, open in the rear, forming a unit that is 15" wide, and essentially 24" deep, although it widens out to 32" at the base. The overhead beam, assuming it is similar in structure to the one in the Johnston Building, consists of a structural I-beam within an exterior casing. The voids surrounding the I-beam, as well as the hollow portion at the rear of the column units, are presumably filled with brick, and the iron and masonry combination holds up the rest of the front of the building. Behind the cosmetic material, the iron is probably intact and in reasonably good shape.

The columns on the upper floors are of stone, with heavy bases and capitals. They rest on short brick piers and are topped by squat brick columns. The windows, which are deeply set behind the facade, have lintels that appear to be cast iron. The windows themselves vary from floor to floor. They are basically double-hung, one over one, but the upper sashes are designed in a variety of configurations, with circle and diamond-centered panes, and small, rectangular pieces of glass arranged around the main lights. The spandrel beams are inset with terra cotta panels, and topped with a stone coping. The three major piers are likewise enlivened with small decorative panels, narrow bands of stone, and slots let into the brick.

At the top are four large metal consoles flanking two sets of triple windows. The consoles project from the facade; the windows are recessed to the same plane as the others. They are surmounted by two massive stone lintels and two brick pediments, giving the entire sixth floor the appearance of a pair of brooding, stylized gables. The whole ensemble, in terms of color, material, and treatment, presents a dramatic study in contrasts. The masonry is in good condition, and the windows are intact.

The building's south side, adjacent to the alley, has three rectangular windows on the first floor and two rectangular and two square windows on floors two through six. There is a metal fire escape towards the back of the building. There are no windows on the north side. At the rear, two large arches rise through all the floors to the fifth; the left one is filled with four windows per

See Continuation Sheet No. 3

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floor; the right one, three. They are double-hung nine-over-nine for the most part, and on the fifth floor, the top sashes are curved to fit under the arches. Above these, at the sixth-floor level, are two horizontal, rectangular openings filled with multi-paned windows.

8. Statement of Significance

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Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

nationally statewide locally

Applicable National Register Criteria A B C D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions) A B C D E F G

Areas of Significance (enter categories from instructions)
ARCHITECTURE

Period of Significance
1881

Significant Dates
1881

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Significant Person
N/A

Architect/Builder

Gott, Jackson C., Architect

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

THEME:

Cast Iron Architecture in Baltimore, Maryland, 1850-1904

SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY:

The Rombro Building is significant as representing a Cast Iron Storefront: Multistory Loft type building.

See continuation sheet

No. 4

For HISTORIC CONTEXT and MARYLAND COMPREHENSIVE HISTORIC PRESERVATION PLAN data.

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 # _____

See continuation sheet No. 10

Primary location of additional data:

- State historic preservation office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Specify repository: _____

10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of property Less than one acre
 USGS Quad: Baltimore East, MD

UTM References

A

1	8	3	6	0	2	9	0	4	3	4	9	8	2	0
Zone		Easting				Northing								

B

Zone		Easting				Northing								

C

Zone		Easting				Northing								

D

Zone		Easting				Northing								

See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

Boundaries are defined as a single city lot, specifically identified as Block 655, Lot 14, recorded among the Land Records of Baltimore City, Maryland.

See continuation sheet

Boundary Justification

The nominated property comprises the city lot upon which the resource stands.

See continuation sheet

11. Form Prepared By

name/title	James D. Dilts		
organization	for Baltimore Heritage, Inc.	date	September 1987
street & number	4611 Keswick Road	telephone	(410) 235-9733
city or town	Baltimore	state	Maryland zip code 21218

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HISTORIC CONTEXT:

MARYLAND COMPREHENSIVE HISTORIC PRESERVATION PLAN DATA

Geographic Organization: Piedmont

Chronological/Developmental Period(s):

Industrial/Urban Dominance A.D. 1870-1930

Prehistoric/Historic Period Theme(s):

Architecture/Landscape Architecture/Community Planning
Economic (Commercial and Industrial)

Resource Type:

Category: Building

Historic Environment: Urban

Historic Function(s) and Use(s):

COMMERCE/TRADE/warehouse
INDUSTRY/PROCESSING/EXTRACTION/manufacturing facility

Known Design Source: Gott, Jackson C., Architect

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HISTORY & SUPPORT:

The Rombro Building, and its fraternal twin to the south, the Johnston Building, are among the few double warehouses remaining in Baltimore. Their colorful and elaborate Victorian facades distinguish them among the city's 19th-century commercial structures. They represent an architectural use of cast iron--as storefront framing--of which relatively few examples remain. The Johnston and Rombro buildings appeared within a year of one another in 1880-1881, built by the same developer, the Johnston Brothers; designed by the same architect, Jackson C. Gott; and with their cast iron elements fabricated by the same foundry, the Variety Iron Works. Over the years, they have housed wholesale companies dealing in tobacco, hats, shoes, clothing, and home and office furnishings. Some early occupants, such as Samuel Hecht, Jr., & Sons, later became significant retailers in Baltimore. Both structures have survived for more than a century with no irreversible alterations. The developers, architect, and foundry were all closely identified with Baltimore. Harriet Lane, the wife of one of the Johnston Brothers, was an important local philanthropist; these buildings were part of her legacy.

"The locality now preferred by the wholesale business men lies south of Baltimore St[reet], and between Charles St[reet] on the east and Eutaw St[reet] on the west," announced the Baltimore correspondent of one of the nation's leading architectural magazines in January, 1881. "In this district a large number of splendid warehouses have been erected within the past two years, and as an inducement to merchants and others, property-holders in this vicinity offer to erect such buildings as may be desired if the tenants will agree to rent for a short term of years."¹

The Johnston brothers, local bankers, were such property owners. In the late 1870s, they assembled roughly half a dozen lots on either side of Cider Alley and in early 1880, they were ready to build. Their first structure was the Johnston Building, completed that year. In early 1881, they decided to put up another. "Messrs. Johnston Bros. & Co. are about to build two

¹American Architect and Building News, January 29, 1881, p. 59.

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warehouses on Howard St[reet], between German and Lombard, each 26' x 110', five-st'y, and basement, the fronts to be of iron and brick with North River stone, terra cotta and moulded brick finish, to cost about \$50,000. Mr. Jackson C. Gott is the architect," noted the same professional publication.²

Baltimore one hundred years ago was the clothing center for the entire South, and the heart of the garment trade was in the city's wholesale district. Many of the companies were housed in buildings such as this, where the goods could be displayed and sales transacted in the ground floor business area while the production took place in the lofts overhead.

The major tenant of the building--and virtually the only one until Morris Rombro bought it in 1919--was Carroll, Adams & Co., wholesalers and manufacturers of boots and shoes. They had good connections with major producers and kept a dozen travelling salesmen on the road in the Midwest and the South. "The premises occupied comprise a superior six-story building with basement 50 x 100 feet in dimensions, admirably equipped with every appliance and convenience for the accommodation and display of the extensive and well-selected stock of boots, and shoes, which are unrivalled for quality, elegance, reliability, durability, and excellence," said one of the contemporary businessmen's books.³ Clark, Perry and Company, boot and shoe wholesalers, also occupied the building early on.

Cast iron columns were often employed to frame the first floors of otherwise masonry commercial buildings, because their compressive strength permitted them to be made more slender than brick or stone piers. With the enlarged openings filled with plate glass, they allowed plenty of light into the interior, along with a clear view of the merchandise on display. They were also decorative and could be quickly erected.

²American Architect and Building News, March 5, 1881, p. 119.

³Half Century's Progress of the City of Baltimore, 1886, New York, p. 148.

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The iron framing for the Rombro Building storefronts was provided by the Variety Iron Works, York, Pennsylvania. The firm had an office in Baltimore, which accounted for a fourth of its sales, and did a substantial business in New York supplying one of the large dealers in architectural ironwork. The Variety Iron Works obtained most of its raw materials from the Ashland Iron Furnace, north of Cockeysville. The company specialized in architectural and ornamental items, such as columns and beams, stairways and shutters, and also turned out machinery, millwork, and entire iron buildings.⁴

The architect, Jackson C. Gott, was well-equipped to deal with these materials. He had apprenticed himself to a carpenter as a young man, and then studied architecture and building construction in the offices of several local architects before becoming one himself at age 25; Gott was often called in during his later career as a consultant on questions of structure.

Gott was born in Baltimore County on a farm on the site of what is now Ruxton. His parents died when he was young; Gott received an elementary education before becoming an apprentice carpenter. As an architect, he designed several houses, commercial office buildings, and industrial plants in Baltimore, as well as the Maryland Penitentiary. His office also produced plans for the Western Maryland Railroad stations at Glyndon and Union Bridge, college buildings in Westminster, and Masonic temples in Belair, Salisbury, and Richmond (Gott was a prominent Mason). He was an active Democrat as well, which may have accounted for his numerous commissions for government buildings. His final design was for the Gaither Building on Baltimore Street, which has since disappeared. Gott retired following the 1904 fire, and died five years later, at age 80. A bachelor, he lived in downtown hotels almost all his life and "was a well known figure about town," said the Baltimore Sun.⁵

⁴The Monumental City, Its Past History and Present Resources, George Howard, 1878, Baltimore, p. 743.

⁵Baltimore Sun, July 9, 1909, p. 14.

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The Johnston brothers, bankers and developers, were equally well-known among Baltimore's businessmen. Henry Elliott Johnston, and Josiah Lee Johnston, his younger brother, had inherited their father's investment banking business, and changed the name to Johnston Brothers and Company; their offices were on Baltimore Street. The two brothers, and Henry's wife, Harriet Lane, were equal partners in the properties near Cider Alley.

Harriet Lane was the niece of James Buchanan. She was an orphan, he was a bachelor. Buchanan raised and educated her, and when he became President in 1857, brought her into the White House where she served as official hostess. During the previous four years, he had been Minister to England, and for some of that period Harriet Lane, who was pretty and vivacious, was the Hostess of the London embassy, where she became a favorite of Queen Victoria. She remained with Buchanan at his home near Lancaster, Pennsylvania, after he left the White House in 1861, until 1866, when she married Henry Elliott Johnston.

The Johnstons lived on Park Avenue in Baltimore and had two sons, both of whom died when they were 13 and 14 of rheumatic fever. In 1883, a year after their second son died, the bereaved parents established the Harriet Lane Home. By this time, both the Rombro Building and the companion warehouse on the other side of Cider Alley had been completed. Henry Elliott Johnston died in 1884, Harriet Lane in 1903, and the surviving brother, Josiah Lee Johnston, in 1904. Because of complications in the three wills, the Board of Managers of the Harriet Lane Home did not immediately establish the institution, but with the death of Josiah Lee Johnston, they could proceed, and they decided to affiliate with the Johns Hopkins Hospital.

When the Harriet Lane Home finally opened in 1912, said a historian of the Hopkins hospital and medical school, it constituted "an important step in the development of pediatrics in America."⁶ Up to that time, there had not been a satisfactory arrangement between a medical school and a children's hospital.

⁶The Johns Hopkins Hospital and The Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Alan M. Chesney, Vol. 3, p. 222.

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John Howland, the first director, and Edward A. Park, his successor, set the high standards for the Harriet Lane Home--which in the 1930s became the Pediatrics Department of the Johns Hopkins Hospital--and Helen B. Taussig, head of the Harriet Lane cardiac clinic, continued them in more recent times.⁷

The lack of a sufficient endowment had been a problem from the beginning. The bulk of the Johnston brothers' estate, including the two warehouses, had been left to the Harriet Lane Home, to be administered by trustees.⁸ In 1919, the Harriet Lane Home probably received in excess of \$125,000 when D.K. Este Fisher, trustee, sold the Rombro Building and the other warehouse structure (the Johnston Building), to separate buyers.⁹

⁷Heritage of Excellence, The Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions, Thomas B. Turner, pp. 122-125; 330-331; 468.

⁸Last Will and testament of Josiah L. Johnston, November 16, 1900, SRM 94-334.

⁹Baltimore City Land Records, Liber 3455, Folio 72; Liber 3456, Folio 215; Liber 3492, Folio 33.

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MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES:

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Maryland Inventory of Historic Properties, Baltimore City, Maryland
Historical Trust, Crownsville, Maryland.