

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

650

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 National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. If any 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.

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Nat. Register of Historic Places
National Park Service

1. Name of Property

Historic name: Hill Wheatley Downtowner Motor Inn
Other names/site number: Downtowner Motor Inn Hotel and Spa, The Springs Hotel and Spa
Name of related multiple property listing: N/A

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

2. Location

Street & number: 135 Central Avenue
City or town: Hot Springs State: AR County: Garland
Not For Publication: Vicinity:


3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,
I hereby certify that this X 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 X meets ___ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I
recommend that this property be considered significant at the following
level(s) of significance:

___ national ___ statewide X local

Applicable National Register Criteria:

X A ___ B X C ___ D

		8/3/2016
Signature of certifying official/Title:		Date
<u>Arkansas Historic Preservation Program</u>		
State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government		

In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria.	
_____ Signature of commenting official: Date	
Title :	State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

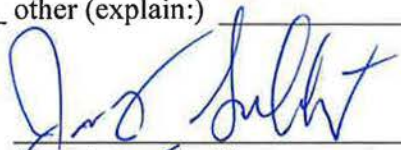
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4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

- entered in the National Register
- determined eligible for the National Register
- determined not eligible for the National Register
- removed from the National Register
- other (explain:)


Signature of the Keeper

9-27-2016
Date of Action

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

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Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>1</u>	_____	buildings
_____	_____	sites
_____	_____	structures
_____	_____	objects
<u>1</u>	_____	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register _____

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Domestic - Hotel

Commerce/Trade - Restaurant

Health Care – Resort – Baths, Spa

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Domestic - Hotel

Commerce/Trade - Restaurant

Health Care – Resort – Baths, Spa

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7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Modern Movement: Mid-Century Modern

Materials: (enter categories from instructions.)

Principal exterior materials of the property: Foundation: Concrete;

Walls: Brick, Glass, Metal: Aluminum, Concrete;

Roof: Asphalt

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current physical appearance and condition of the property. Describe contributing and noncontributing resources if applicable. Begin with a **summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, type, style, method of construction, setting, size, and significant features. Indicate whether the property has

Summary Paragraph

The Hill Wheatley Downtowner Motor Inn is a ten-story purpose-built hotel at the northwestern corner of the intersection of Central Avenue and Canyon Street in Hot Springs, Arkansas. The Downtowner Motor Inn is also located within the boundaries of the Hot Springs Central Avenue Historic District (NR 6.25.1985) in Hot Springs, Arkansas (Hot Springs National Park) but was constructed outside of the district's period of significance. This Mid-Century Modern style structure, unusual in the historic heart of Hot Springs, uses the adjacent natural hot springs, governed by the National Park, for its interior bathhouse and spa. The building's exterior is composed primarily of brick, glass, concrete and aluminum following the precepts of Modern Architecture in its composition.

Narrative Description

The Hill Wheatley Downtowner Motor Inn is a landmark along the northern section of Central Avenue. The streetscape along Central Avenue is a mix of late 19th to early 20th century architecture including various revival-style bathhouses to various commercial structures. This Modern structure contrasts this back drop of more traditional architecture, but it respects the streetscape, in keeping with the Modern principals of urban design, by setting the hotel tower

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back from the street. The two-story space housing the lobby and baths adjoins Central Avenue with a covered pedestrian area, adjacent to the sidewalk, which provides shading in summer and protection in winter.

The hotel was designed by noted architect Noland Blass Jr., of the Little Rock, Arkansas, firm of Erhart, Eichenbaum, Rauch & Blass in 1963 and was completed in 1965. The building sits on a continuous concrete foundation, and is structurally composed of cantilevered concrete slabs supported by interior reinforced-concrete columns on a repeated grid. The structure is topped with a flat roof, with small rectangular cut outs along the southern edge over the tenth floor balcony space.

The ground floor and the second floor are the largest, in terms of area; while the third through tenth floors are set back, creating a tower over a larger base. This allows for the lobby area, restaurant and gift shop to be covered by the slab of the second floor. This also allows for the second floor to have a large exterior space, where the hotel's pool and outdoor recreation area are located. The shape of the gift shop is echoed by the pool directly above it on the second floor outdoor patio.

The drive through at the northwestern edge of the ground floor connects to a small rear parking lot and a one way drive to a larger parking lot to the northeast of the building, adjacent to Canyon Street. The site slopes dramatically up to the north, away from Central Avenue. The northwestern edge of the property includes a large rock face and a steep mountainous area. This results in the building seeming to be nestled within the surrounding landscape.

Southwest (Front) Façade

The southwest façade is dominated at the street edge by the large concrete band of the second floor cantilever and enclosing wall. The second floor wall serves as the enclosure for the pool area and exterior recreation area. The first floor is recessed under the overhang of the second floor. The remaining eight floors are also recessed from the second floor exterior area, creating a tower of hotel rooms. The exterior of the third through tenth floors include bands of the concrete balcony enclosure walls with narrow dividing walls between each room. The fronts of the balconies are partially covered by thirty five rectangular wood grills supported by metal bands. These grills are evenly dispersed along the exterior of the balconies in an alternating pattern with five grills along each floor. These grills offer shading from the angled evening sun that hits this façade. The northwestern section of the first floor is given over to an open air drive through, which extends from the front façade through the rear of the structure. The southeastern edge of this façade is terminated by a vertical band of bluff brick along the third to tenth floor tower section of the building.

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Southeast (Side) Façade

The southeast façade of the Hill Wheatley Downtowner Motor Inn is composed of a large vertical section of buff brick at the northern edge. The rest of the façade is composed of large stationary windows in aluminum frames with grey panels below the large vertical panes at each floor level. Each floor contains fourteen stationary windows and seven lower panels. The roof overhangs this façade slightly. The cantilevered concrete band of the second floor is extended toward Central Avenue and overhangs the open air section of the first floor restaurant and dining spaces. A small one-story section of the building is nestled into the slope of the site at the northeast corner of the hotel. This is the original kitchen space and is topped by a flat roof. This kitchen section is composed of buff colored brick and includes two vent openings with metal louvers.

Northeast (Rear) Façade

The rear façade echoes the front façade, with horizontal concrete balcony wall bands with wooden grills. A large vertical section of buff brick near the center of the façade is an exterior expression of the interior service spaces of the hotel. A small extended section of the second floor along the northeast façade serves as a sheltered service space and is covered in vertical metal siding. A small, venting structure sits on top of the one story kitchen structure. This small venting structure is covered in metal siding. This rear façade is edged with a vertical band of buff brick along the eastern edge. The visible rear sections of the second floor level are clad in buff brick. The ground floor and second floor are slightly set back from the rest of the structure toward the northwestern edge of this façade.

Northwest (Side) Façade

The northwest façade of the Hill Wheatley Downtowner Motor Inn is clad in buff brick. A central vertical column of large stationary windows are interspersed with panels at each floor level. A section at the ground floor level, to the northwest edge of this façade, is open and supported by large square concrete column. This opening serves as a separate access to the drive through portion of the structure.

Interior

The interior of the Hill Wheatley Downtowner Motor Inn features a ground floor lobby space, with entrances along Central Avenue and the drive through space on the western edge of the building. The lobby is punctuated by the structural columns of the interior of the hotel. A large

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floating stair, composed of Mexican terrazzo tile treads over metal supports with redwood accents and a continuous metal railing is supported by a slender black support column under the intermediate landing. The stairway appears to float within the lobby space without support and is separated from the western wall. The glazing along the front façade, at the ground level only, is composed of stationary glass panels set in bronze frames, a more expensive and ornate material for the most public of the hotel's spaces. The central gift shop space is oval in shape, with curving walls of glass and metal panels that divide the exterior entrance areas of this floor into two separate spaces. The first floor also includes a central reception desk, large dining room and restaurant area.

The second floor includes the exterior recreation area with a pool that mirrors the outline of the gift shop on the floor below. The second floor also includes a large event space as well as the purpose-built spa and bathhouse space. The bathhouse has been updated and reconfigured due to updates in technology and health and safety requirements; however, the space still utilizes the thermal springs adjacent to the site. This hotel is one of only a very few that has continually offered thermal bath treatments since its construction. The third through ninth floors include the hotel rooms, with suites interspersed with smaller rooms. The tenth floor is a private residence and includes a full kitchen, several bedrooms, several living spaces, an octagonal dining space and large outdoor patios.

Integrity

The building retains a high level of integrity, with the original wooden shading grills on the exterior, the original glazing system and an original layout of rooms and suites. The hotel did undergo a limited remodel after a change of ownership in the early 2000s. The interior of the public spaces were remodeled, with new carpeting in the hallways of the upper floors and new wooden paneling wrapping the structural columns in the lobby and second floor spaces. The lobby and second floor public spaces were originally clad in redwood panels, as indicated on original plans for the building retained by the current owners. The tenth floor was renovated during the first few years of the hotel's existence to allow the room to be used as a residence for Mr. Hill Wheatley and his family. The tenth floor had previously been used for card rooms for the extensive illicit gambling scene of Hot Springs that survived until the mid-1960s. The upper portion of the west façade has been partially re-clad, due to a deterioration of the original bricks as the structure settled. The bathhouse and spa space has been renovated at least once since it was opened in 1965. The walls were originally clad with pastel pink tile, which has now been covered by larger earth-tone tiles.

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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.)

- 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 old or achieving significance within the past 50 years

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Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

COMMERCE

ENTERTAINMENT/RECREATION

ARCHITECTURE

Period of Significance

1963-1965

Significant Dates

1965

Significant Person

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

Cultural Affiliation

Architect/Builder

Noland Blass Jr.

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Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance, applicable criteria, justification for the period of significance, and any applicable criteria considerations.)

The Hill Wheatley Downtowner Motor Inn is being nominated to the National Register of Historic Places under **Criterion A**, with **local significance**, for its association with the continued development of Commerce and Entertainment/Recreation in Hot Springs, Arkansas, during the 1960s. It is also being nominated under **Criterion C**, with **local significance**, as an excellent example of a Mid-Century Modern style hotel designed by central Arkansas architect Noland Blass, Jr., in downtown Hot Springs, Arkansas.

Narrative Statement of Significance (Provide at least **one** paragraph for each area of significance.)

Elaboration

The City of Hot Springs

The city of Hot Springs sits at the base of the Ouachita Mountains southwest of the Arkansas state capitol of Little Rock. The water from the hot springs began to be known for having medicinal qualities and attracted visitors from all over the region. It developed into a well-known resort nicknamed "The American Spa". In 1830, the first bathhouses were constructed in Hot Springs. The area thrived on the business created by containing and distributing the heated waters in therapeutic bathhouses. By the 1870s Hot Springs was nationally advertised as "The Nation's Health Sanitarium".¹ Bathhouse Row (NR 11.13.1974, NHL 5.28.1987) along Central Avenue became the centerpiece of bathing culture in Hot Springs during the late 19th century. The baths faded as medical treatment with the advent of modern medical science, but people still came by the thousands for relaxation and recreation throughout the 20th century.²

The Central Avenue Historic District (NR 6.25.1985) possesses one of Arkansas's richest collections of historic commercial buildings, centered on historic Bathhouse Row.³ Historically,

¹ Shugart Sharon, *Hot Springs National Park: A Brief History of the Park* (National Park Service, 2003).

² *Ibid.*

³ Goodman, Bernard. Bathhouse Row. National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form. Files of the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Listed 13 November 1974. Hot Springs Central Avenue

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Central Avenue offered a wide variety of hotels, stores, restaurants and office buildings, all constructed to serve the needs of the visitors to Bathhouse Row. As the area became more popular, the bathhouses and hotels became more lavish to cater to their wealthy clientele. As visitors increased, new hotels and boarding houses replaced the smaller and less sophisticated of the previous decades. Several important hotels were constructed during the latter part of the nineteenth century that attempted to surpass the quality of earlier establishments thus perpetuating continued competition among the hotels. From its earliest days, the strength of the downtown business area in Hot Springs was deeply rooted in its accommodations for the tourists who visited.⁴

After early European exploration, the land surrounding the springs was used mostly by travelers and early settlers as a source of healing thermal water. In 1804, a four-week expedition by George Hunter and William Dunbar was undertaken to the thermal springs.⁵ These early explorers were unable to discover the source of springs, but they did note the few rudimentary shelters that had been built for visitors to the springs and the area's interesting geology. In 1807, local planter Emmanuel Prudhomme became the first settler of modern Hot Springs National Park.⁶ Over the next few decades, new homes and even a few early hotels started to draw new residents and travelers to the area.⁷

In 1820, the Arkansas Territorial Legislature requested that the springs and adjoining mountains be set aside as a federal reservation.⁸ In 1832, the 22nd United States Congress formed the national reservation at Hot Springs, granting federal protection to the local thermal springs.⁹ The Hot Springs Reservation was designated for public use as a park in 1880. In 1921, an act of Congress changed the name officially to Hot Springs National Park with its designation as the 18th National Park.¹⁰ The town of Hot Springs was incorporated in 1851 as a health spa and resort area, catering to invalids and leisure seekers who hoped to find relief in the area's thermal springs at the local bathhouses.¹¹ Before the town was officially established, the area surrounding the springs was reserved for federal use by the United States Congress in 1832.¹² The first bathhouses to utilize the thermal springs along Hot Springs Mountain were small cabins

Historic District. National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form. Files of the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Listed 13 November 1974.

⁴ Shugart Sharon, *Hot Springs National Park: A Brief History of the Park* (National Park Service, 2003).

⁵ Isabel Burton Anthony, *Garland County, Arkansas: Our History and Heritage* (Hot Springs National Park: Garland County Historical Society, 2009), 13-14.

⁶ Guy Lancaster, "Hot Springs (Garland County)", *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*, November 12, 2014.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Sharon Shugart, *Hot Springs National Park: A Brief History of the Park* (National Park Service, 2003).

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Lancaster, "Hot Springs (Garland County)".

¹² Shugart Sharon, *Hot Springs National Park: A Brief History of the Park* (National Park Service, 2003).

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and frame buildings.¹³ After the federal government began controlling the springs in the 1870s, major improvements were made to the area. This included the covering the nearby Hot Springs Creek with stone arches and a wide park area, cleaning up rubbish, and starting a centralized plumbing system to provide water to the bathhouses.¹⁴

As the popularity of thermal water treatments for various ills and afflictions grew during the end of the 19th century through the mid-20th century, the town of Hot Springs came to depend on the tourists and patients attracted by the springs. After 1877, when Benjamin F. Kelley was appointed by Congress as the first superintendent of the Hot Springs Reservation, new engineering projects and the construction of a rail connection from the Rock Island Railroad transformed the area into a major resort destination that would continue to grow for decades.¹⁵

During the 19th and 20th century, the town of Hot Springs had grown out of the small valley between Hot Springs Mountain to the east and West Mountain to the west. The bathhouses, now all situated along Bathhouse Row, running along the eastern side of Central Avenue were improved, remodeled and rebuilt through the 1930s. The history of the city was also tied to various natural or man-made disasters including floods and devastating fires. The placement of the hotels and bathhouses allowed them to easily cater to the tourist trade while taking advantage of the spring water that flowed through the National Park's water supply system. By the end of the 1930s all of the major bathhouses had been transformed into large palaces for healing and relaxation.

Through the 1950s, several bathhouses and spas successfully enticed new and returning visitors to sample the thermal waters of the springs. Although the Great Depression years of the 1930s did affect the profitability of the bathhouses and park, a cut in the general hours of operation for the bathhouses helped to divert too heavy a financial blow.¹⁶ The tourist trade, however, did begin to slowly diminish by the 1970s. The Downtowner Motor Inn of Hot Springs was completed during the last few years of high profitability and general public interest in the thermal baths and the booming gambling industry in the city. Open gambling was an institution in Hot Springs during the 1950s and early 1960s. This led to a short boom in new hotel construction, with the Downtowner as one of these new hotels. The gambling in Hot Springs came to a quick end in 1967 when new governor Winthrop Rockefeller and the State Police led a

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Lancaster, "Hot Springs (Garland County)".

¹⁶ "1933: ... Park concession business dropped off because of the Great Depression, but early closing to decrease operating costs stopped the decline." Sharon Shurgart, *The Hot Springs of Arkansas the the Years: A Chronology of Events* (Hot Springs National Park: Department of the Interior: National Park Service, 2004).

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campaign to clean up the city.¹⁷ This helped to spur the downturn in the tourist trade for the city in the following decades. The great bathhouses that had been constructed in the late 19th century and early 20th century closed one by one. By 1985, only the Buckstaff Bathhouse was still operating on Bathhouse Row.¹⁸ By the turn of the 21st century, new interest in heritage tourism and the listing of Bathhouse Row as a National Historic Landmark in 1987 led to a revival in Hot Springs National Park and the surrounding city of Hot Springs.

The Development of the Downtowner Motor Inn

The first Downtowner Motor Inn was opened by Luther F. Matthews in November of 1958.¹⁹ This first Downtowner Motor Inn was located in Memphis, Tennessee, very near to the long established Hotel Peabody. Mr. Matthews began his career in business by parking cars for the Allright Parking Company in Houston, Texas, in 1935. By 1946, Matthews was entrusted with surveying parking needs in larger southern cities. After this survey of potential business expansion opportunities was complete, Luther Matthews was tasked with starting a new branch of the Allright Parking Company in Memphis, Tennessee, under the new name of Parkrite.²⁰ The early years of the parking industry were focused on small owners who would manage surface lots. Some owners expanded and were able to hire others to work in the lots while they sought to expand their ownership of available real-estate. Allright Parking Company allowed Matthews to invest in new property in Memphis for parking while the accounting for the business was handled at the Houston headquarters for the company.²¹

Memphis was suffering from a lack of available parking services during the late 1940s.²² Matthews was able to introduce the first privately-run paved parking in Memphis and positioned himself to meet a need for service at a very low operational cost. He soon saw an additional need for new hotel services in the downtown area. Matthews learned from his parking experience the public's desire for convenience. He coupled this knowledge with ideas gathered from other successful automobile oriented motels, including the increasingly successful Holiday Inn chain. The Holiday Inn chain was also established and headquartered in Memphis and Matthews knew the leader of the chain, Mr. Kemmons Wilson. The Holiday Inn chain of hotels had been established by Mr. Wilson in 1952, with the completion of his first hotel in Memphis.

¹⁷Clay Farrar, "Garland Anthony: Hot Springs Motel Entrepreneur," *The Record*, Garland County Historical Society, 2007. p 164.

¹⁸ Sharon Shugart, *Hot Springs National Park: A Brief History of the Park* (National Park Service, 2003).

¹⁹ Keith A. Sculle, "Production of the Downtowner Motel Chain in Memphis," *The West Tennessee Historical Society Papers*, 54: 94-108, 2000.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

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The Holiday Inn chain quickly grew to over 1,000 hotels by 1968.²³ Matthews was known to have occasionally sought the advice of Kemmons Wilson in regard to his plans for the Downtowner Motor Inns.²⁴ Matthew's new Downtowner Motor Inn plan would take lessons from the new breed of highway-oriented motels and more traditional downtown high-rise hotels.

The new types of automobile-focused motels that appeared across the United States in the mid-20th century were often located along highways at the edges of cities.²⁵ These new motels were also focused on low rates, easy access and self-parking. The new Downtowner Motor Inn in Memphis was an experiment that combined the low-rates and clean sparseness of new suburban motels with the convenience and traditions of service of older downtown hotels. The Downtowner Motor Inn would also utilize valet parking, to allow for more compact parking spaces, constructed to be housed in a garage under the main hotel structure. The valet parking scheme would become a standard for the chain, which allowed for parking spaces that were not necessarily adjacent to rooms or the main entrance.²⁶

Matthews used the term "Motor Inn" to imply the hybrid of the motel with its minimal services with the traditional service expectations of the older hotel type.²⁷ As Matthews developed his goals for future franchises, he established an early focus on only downtown areas, avoiding fringes of cities and open highways. Matthews' experience in parking services also helped to influence the design of the first Downtowner Motor Inns. He created specific ratios for parking to room space, based on occupancy and the number of guests possibly arriving in an area by car, train or air. One of the major innovations of the Downtowner Motor Inn was the use of free valet parking, with no expectation of tipping. This gave customers an added service while also requiring less area for parking in relation to self-parking.²⁸ While the first Downtowner was designed and constructed by the firm of Windrom, Haglund, and Venable in Memphis, Tennessee, a young Memphis architect by the name of George Thomason would design many of the other Downtowner Motor Inns after winning the commission to design the second Downtowner in Kingsport, Tennessee.²⁹

The year after Matthews completed his first Downtowner Motor Inn, he was already planning an expansion of the hotel onto an adjacent lot and the creation of a nationwide chain of at least 75

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.* 99.

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motels.³⁰ The Downtowner Motor Inn franchise campaign continued through the 1960s and included the building of hotels in Little Rock, which opened in 1961, and in Hot Springs, which opened in 1965. By the 1970s, the downtown areas of many urban centers were deteriorating and the company that managed the Downtowner Motor Inn franchise lost much of its value, resulting in the closure of the company in 1982.³¹ Most of the Downtowner Motor Inns were either closed permanently or were maintained as independent low-budget hotels. The Downtowner Motor Inn of Hot Springs mostly escaped this low-budget conversion due to the continued tourist economy of Hot Springs and the adjacent National Park.

Hill Wheatley and the Downtowner Motor Inn

Hill Wheatley played a critical role in the development of the Hot Springs Historic District by developing and owning and operating thirty-six properties in downtown Hot Springs.³² As a local entrepreneur, Hill Wheatley knew the value of the real estate along Central Avenue in the downtown area, and he spent his life investing in and developing this area.

Hill Wheatley was born on June 24, 1894, in Myers, Arkansas, a small community to the west of Hot Springs. He left school after the sixth grade to work full time in a local store. He eventually became the single largest single property owner in Hot Springs. He also developed several of his properties. The Downtowner Motor Inn was most likely one of the largest projects he completed in downtown Hot Springs.³³

Hill Wheatley invested heavily in Hot Springs, mostly in the downtown area. In addition to the many properties he owned and managed, he also had at least eight private pay to park parking lots by 1961.³⁴ His interest in parking and his investment in the Downtowner Motor Inn chain of hotels is an interesting parallel to the founder of the Downtowner Motor Inn chain, Mr. Luther Matthews. A favorite Wheatley adage was, "There is only one thing that they will never make any more of, and that is land."³⁵ He had a habit of putting his name on every building that he owned, and had a practice of rarely selling any property he bought. While many other

³⁰ Sculle, "Production of the Downtowner Motel Chain in Memphis." "New Motor Inn Fifth in Chain; 7 Others Set." *Arkansas Gazette*. 18 February 1961.

³¹ Sculle, "Production of the Downtowner Motel Chain in Memphis."

³² Jimmie Lois Canton Jones, *Obituaries From Sentinel Record and Other News Prints Around Garland County*, (Jones Book Shelf: Hot Springs, Arkansas), 199, p. 378. Hot Springs Central Avenue Historic District. National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form. Files of the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Listed 13 November 1974.

³³ Jones, *Obituaries From Sentinel Record and Other News Prints Around Garland County*, 378.

³⁴ Ernie Deane, "The Arkansas Traveler: Hot Springs Undergoes 'Face-lifting'," *Arkansas Gazette*, 31 December 1961.

³⁵ Jones, *Obituaries From Sentinel Record and Other News Prints Around Garland County*, 378.

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Downtowner Motor Inns were simply referred to by the chain name, Mr. Wheatley's motor inn prominently displayed his name above the chain brand along Central Avenue. He particularly loved buying real estate in downtown Hot Springs, and was dedicated to preserving the history of the city he called home. Many downtown merchants credit Hill Wheatley with saving at least 10 historic buildings from demolition.³⁶ Wheatley is also remembered by local residents as someone who would rarely update any of his properties and would not respond to tenant requests for modernization. The deferred maintenance of many of his properties is also regarded as one of the reasons that downtown Hot Springs rapidly declined as a tourist destination during the 1970s and 1980s. At the time the downtown area was listed as the Hot Springs Central Avenue Historic District in 1985, Hill Wheatley owned several of the buildings within the historic district.³⁷

In 1963, Mr. Wheatley began construction on the ten-story Downtowner Motor Inn along Central Avenue. The site was formerly the Virginia Apartments and Boarding House as well as a Greek Confectioner.³⁸ When the Downtowner opened its doors in 1965, it delighted its visitors with luxurious furnishings, fine dining, and a bathhouse where they could enjoy bathing in the thermal water from the hot springs.³⁹ A local contemporary newspaper reported that Mr. Wheatley's mother was the first customer of the newly opened bathhouse in April of 1965. Later advertisements noted:

“The Hill Wheatley Downtown (sic.) Motor Inn and Baths features the Piccadilly and Gainsborough Rooms for dining – The Lion and Crown for unusual gifts – The Carriage, Crown, Crest, and Coronet Rooms for meetings from 10 to 200 – 150 rooms, and suites, individual balconies, beauty salon, year round sundeck and heated pool. Free Parking. World Famous Thermal Baths and Massages Under Regulation United States Government.”⁴⁰

Mr. Wheatley paid attention to every detail of the new hotel but especially those of the 9,000 square foot penthouse that spanned the entire tenth floor. The top floor was originally designed as luxurious card rooms. In 1967, with the local crackdown on illegal gambling sites, the tenth floor was remodeled to serve as the Wheatley family residence.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Hot Springs Central Avenue Historic District. National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form. Files of the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Listed 13 November 1974.

³⁸ Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, Hot Springs, Arkansas, 1950. City Directories of Hot Springs, Arkansas, 1928-1940.

³⁹ “Owner's 90-year-old Mother First Downtowner Bath House Bather,” *The Sentinel Record*, Hot Springs National Park, Arkansas, 15 April 1965.

⁴⁰ Downtowner Motor Inns Hill Wheatley Hot Springs National Park Arkansas. Continental Chrome Postcard. c. 1981.

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Architect Noland Blass, Jr.

The Hill Wheatley Downtowner Motor Inn was designed by architect Noland Blass, Jr., a prolific architect in central Arkansas during the mid to late 20th century. This is unusual for the Downtowner chain, due to the fact that George Thomason was usually the main designer.⁴¹ However, Thomason may not have had a license to practice in Arkansas. Also, the design of the Hot Springs Downtowner Motor Inn differs from previous designs that feature exterior walkway access to the hotel rooms as well as the lack of colored exterior end panels and metal exterior railings as seen in the now demolished Downtowner Inns in Memphis, Little Rock and Pine Bluff.

Blass, Jr.'s grandfather, Gus Blass, founded the Gus Blass Department Store on Main Street in downtown Little Rock in 1871.⁴² Gus Blass continued to guide the company that bore his name until his death in 1919. Afterwards, control of the store fell to Julian Blass, Gus Blass's son. Julian headed the company until his death in 1939. In 1939, Noland Blass Sr., brother to Julian, became store president and remained in that post until his retirement in 1950.⁴³ Noland Blass, Jr., was born to Noland and Isabel Blass on May 28, 1920.⁴⁴ During his childhood, Noland Blass, Jr., often spent time at the department store his father ran. In a profile of his life in the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* in 1991, Blass stated that "our father always used to work late and we would always go in the candy department and steal candy."⁴⁵ He graduated High School from the Little Rock school system and then attended Cornell University at Ithaca, New York. He graduated from Cornell University in 1941 with a bachelor's degree in Architecture. While a senior at Cornell, Blass received a gold medal award for his senior architectural thesis.⁴⁶ After completing college, Blass volunteered for the Army and served in Germany and the Philippines during the height of World War II. In 1946, he was discharged at the age 26 as a Major.⁴⁷ After returning to Little Rock in 1946, Blass was hired as a designer-draftsman by the architectural firm of Erhart, Eichenbaum and Rauch.⁴⁸ Blass would work with this firm for the rest of his career, eventually leading the firm as a principle designing architect for several years with the firm changing names to Erhart, Eichenbaum, Rauch & Blass during the late 1950s. The firm continues to exist today as GHN: Architects + Engineers. Blass, Jr., expanded the firms focus to

⁴¹ Sculle, "Production of the Downtowner Motel Chain in Memphis," 99.

⁴² LeMaster, *Corner of the Tapestry*, 113.

⁴³ LeMaster, *Corner of the Tapestry*, 113.

⁴⁴ "Noland Blass, Jr., of Little Rock," *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, July 23, 1998, 6B.

⁴⁵ Ellen F. Kreth, "High Profile: Noland Blass, Jr.," *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, November 17, 1991. special section.

⁴⁶ "Noland Blass, Jr., of Little Rock," *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, July 23, 1998, 6B.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ "Noland Blass, Jr.," *Levi Letter*, n 1, 1983, p 3.

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large scale projects that incorporated many designers, architect, engineers and even other firms. As the principle designing architect and leader of the firm, Blass, Jr., created an architectural legacy across central Arkansas.

Blass's career was varied and he worked on projects throughout central Arkansas, including award winning projects at Horace-Mann Junior High and Oaklawn Jockey Club. He also designed the Arkansas State Justice Building, Arkansas Supreme Court Rotunda, Temple B'nai Israel in Little Rock and several projects at the University of Arkansas for Medical Science (UAMS). His favorite project was his early brutalist design for the Worthen Bank and Trust building that was completed in 1969.⁴⁹ He was also a prominent figure in urban planning and development in Little Rock through his work on an east-west expressway project, a river-front park proposal, multi-use arena proposal, hotel-convention center complex and historic restoration and preservation projects in the historic districts near downtown Little Rock.⁵⁰ Blass was also very active in the civic arena in Little Rock and served as the President of the Arkansas Arts Center and President of the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra Society as well as being a member of various boards and committees across the city.⁵¹

Noland Blass, Jr., continued to practice at the same firm throughout his career, eventually rising to leadership of Blass Chilcote Carter Gaskin Bogart & Norcross.⁵² He continued to practice architecture until 1991, when he officially retired. However, he continued to work on various architectural and artistic projects until his death in 1998.⁵³ Throughout his career, Blass ,Jr., learned and practiced with modernistic forms and his building designs ranged from the early brutalism of the Worthen Bank and Trust Building, now the Bank of America Building in downtown Little Rock, to the sculptural forms of the 1976 glass rotunda, built to house the chambers of the Arkansas Supreme Court.

Blass's design for the Hill Wheatley Downtowner Motor Inn is unusual, with only the Summit House on North University Avenue featuring a repeated, alternating vertical bands on the exterior roughly similar to the wood shading grills of the Downtowner Motor Inn. The Modernist design of the Motor Inn reflects the progressive cultural and societal attitude of the client and architect to create a hotel and bathhouse with a design sensitive to mid-twentieth century post war Arkansas and America. Located in Hot Springs National Park, the design makes use of the natural hot springs for its bathhouse. The ten-story structure, in accordance

⁴⁹ Ellen F. Kreth, "High Profile: Noland Blass, Jr.," *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, November 17, 1991. special section.

⁵⁰ "Noland Blass, Jr., of Little Rock," *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, July 23, 1998, 6B.

⁵¹ Ellen F. Kreth, "High Profile: Noland Blass, Jr.," *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, November 17, 1991. special section.

⁵² "Noland Blass, Jr., of Little Rock," *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, July 23, 1998, 6B.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

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with Modernist design principles, is set back from Central Avenue to preserve open space and allow maximum sunlight into the streetscape. The Modernist design communicated that the older bathhouse and hotel typologies could be combined and have a prominent place in the contemporary streetscape of Hot Springs. The promenade down Central Avenue, along Bathhouse Row, is further enhanced at the Downtowner Motor Inn by a covered open area along the front of the hotel with landscape planters and shaded areas for the respite of patrons from the sun or weather.

The Modernistic architecture also addressed environmental concerns that remain contemporary issues. Tinted glass was used throughout the structure for shading; balcony overhangs on each floor provided further shading from the solar gain of the sun. Also the brick masonry and exposed reinforced concrete structure allowed for “solar averaging.” The redwood solar screens provided additional shading and ornamental visual relief from the verticality of the large concrete balcony walls. A continuity of design was achieved through the use of redwood on the interior. The redwood screens on the exterior were reflected in the use of redwood interior trim and accent ceilings. The openness of the glass exterior is complimented by bronze and glass divisions in the lobby and gift shop. Hidden details, such as the floating interior stairway and the repetition of the form of the ground floor gift shop in the perimeter form of the second floor swimming pool show the depth of design within the entire structure. The building was designed with restrained detailing and simple forms to create a unified mid-century modern design that would remain stylish without the added ornament of previous and more common revival styles found throughout the surrounding historic district.

The Hill Wheatley Downtowner Motor Inn is one of only a few multi-story buildings built in the mid-century modern style Hot Springs and one of only three in the Central Avenue Historic District. It is also unusual for its full service bathhouse located on the second floor with thermal water being pumped from the hot springs of the adjacent National Park. The hotel continues to be in daily use and a plan is being developed by new investors for a restoration of the property.

Although the structure is located within the Hot Springs Central Avenue Historic District, this structure was originally noted as non-contributing due to the age of the structure. The property had not reached 50 years of age when the historic district was initially surveyed. The property also falls outside the Period of Significance for the surrounding historic district. An extension to the surrounding district’s Period of Significance was not pursued due to the lack of development after the 1930s in the area for several decades and the number of non-contributing structures that would still exist even if an extended period of significance was warranted.

The Hill Wheatley Downtowner Motor Inn is being nominated to the National Register of Historic Places under **Criterion A**, with **local significance**, for its association with the continued

Hill Wheatley Downtowner Motor Inn
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development of commerce and Entertainment/Recreation in Hot Springs, Arkansas, during the 1960s. It is also being nominated under **Criterion C**, with **local significance**, as an excellent example of a Mid-Century Modern style hotel designed by central Arkansas architect Noland Blass, Jr., in downtown Hot Springs, Arkansas.

9. Major Bibliographical References

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Hill Wheatley Downtowner Motor Inn

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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 # _____
- recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # _____

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
 - Other State agency
 - Federal agency
 - Local government
 - University
 - Other
- Name of repository: _____

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): GA0678

10. Geographical Data

Acreege of Property <1 acre

Use either the UTM system or latitude/longitude coordinates

Hill Wheatley Downtowner Motor Inn
Name of Property

Garland, Arkansas
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Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS84: _____
(enter coordinates to 6 decimal places)

- | | |
|--------------|------------|
| 1. Latitude: | Longitude: |
| 2. Latitude: | Longitude: |
| 3. Latitude: | Longitude: |
| 4. Latitude: | Longitude: |

Or

UTM References

Datum (indicated on USGS map):

NAD 1927 or NAD 1983

- | | | |
|---------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| 1. Zone: 15 S | Easting: 494964 | Northing: 3819606 |
| 2. Zone: | Easting: | Northing: |
| 3. Zone: | Easting: | Northing: |
| 4. Zone: | Easting : | Northing: |

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

Subdivision HSR, Block 127, Lots 001 - 005 in the incorporated town of Hot Springs,
Garland County, Arkansas.

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

This boundary includes all of the property historically associated with the Hill Wheatley
Downtowner Motor Inn in Hot Springs, Arkansas.

Hill Wheatley Downtowner Motor Inn
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11. Form Prepared By

name/title: Charles Hill & Crissy Rodgers

name/title: Edited by Callie Williams, National Register Historian

organization: Arkansas Historic Preservation Program

street & number: 323 Center Street, Suite 1500, Tower Building

city or town: Little Rock state: AR zip code: 72201

e-mail calliew@arkansasheritage.org

telephone: 501-324-9880

date: May 4, 2016

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A **USGS map** or equivalent (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
- **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map.
- **Additional items:** (Check with the SHPO, TPO, or FPO for any additional items.)

Photographs

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels (minimum), 3000x2000 preferred, at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map. Each photograph must be numbered and that number must correspond to the photograph number on the photo log. For simplicity, the name of the photographer, photo date, etc. may be listed once on the photograph log and doesn't need to be labeled on every photograph.

Hill Wheatley Downtowner Motor Inn
Name of Property

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Photo Log

Name of Property: Hill Wheatley Downtowner Motor Inn

City or Vicinity: Hot Springs

County: Garland State: Arkansas

Photographer: Travis Ratermann

Date Photographed: May 18, 2016

Description of Photograph(s) and number, include description of view indicating direction of camera:

1 of 9: Front (southwest) elevation of the Hill Wheatley Downtowner Motor Inn, camera facing north.

2 of 9: Detail of the front (southwest) elevation of the Hill Wheatley Downtowner Motor Inn, camera facing east.

3 of 9: Detail of the front (southwest) elevation, showing the wooden screen grills of the Hill Wheatley Downtowner Motor Inn, camera facing north.

4 of 9: Side (southeast) elevation of the Hill Wheatley Downtowner Motor Inn, camera facing north.

5 of 9: Side (southeast) elevation of the Hill Wheatley Downtowner Motor Inn, camera facing southwest.

6 of 9: Rear (northeast) elevation of the Hill Wheatley Downtowner Motor Inn, camera facing west.

7 of 9: Side (northwest) elevation of the Hill Wheatley Downtowner Motor Inn, camera facing southeast.

8 of 9: Detail of the rear (northeast) elevation of the Hill Wheatley Downtowner Motor Inn, illustrating the rear of the drive-through opening, camera facing southwest.

9 of 9: Detail of the interior lobby the Hill Wheatley Downtowner Motor Inn, illustrating the floating stairway, camera facing northwest.

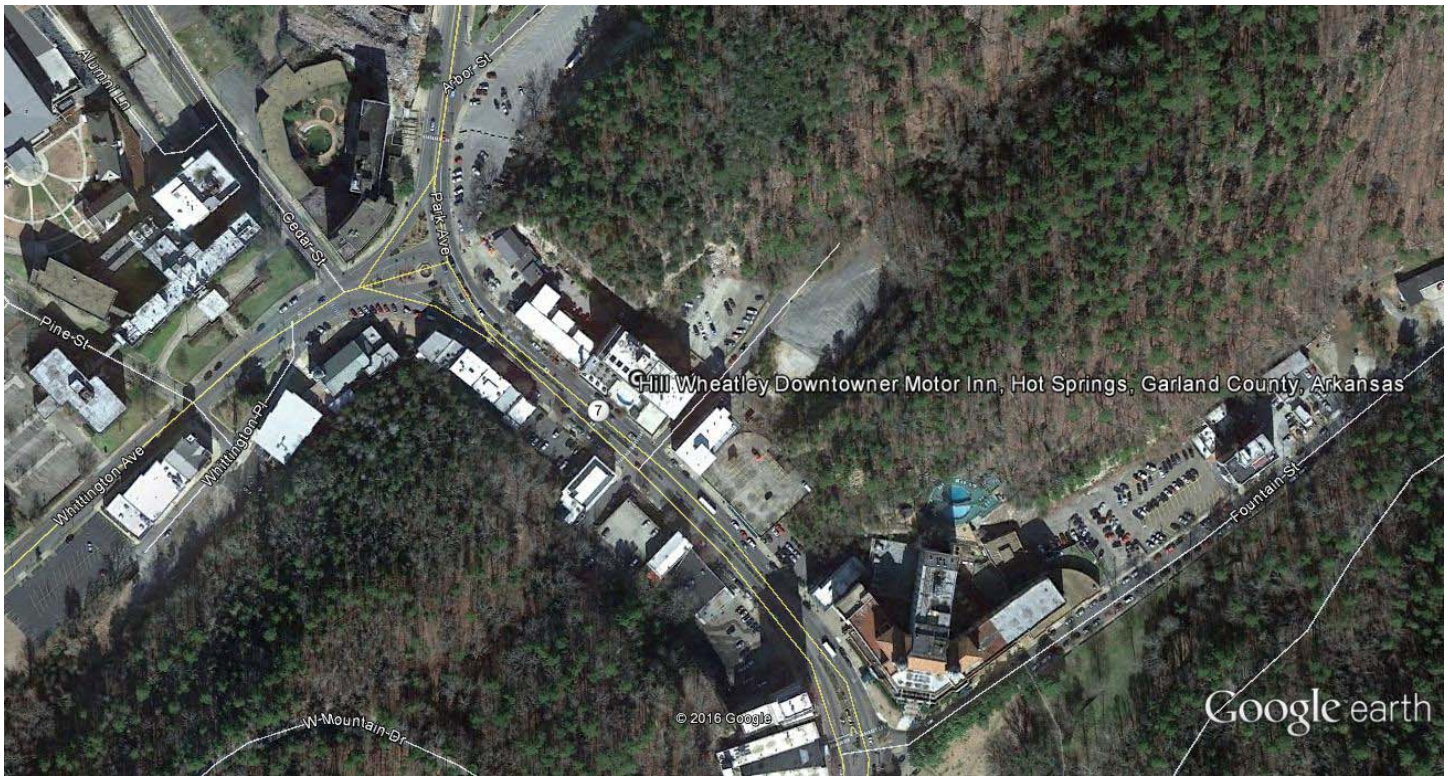
Hill Wheatley Downtowner Motor Inn
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Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list 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.460 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 100 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 Office of Planning and Performance Management, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC.

Hill Wheatley Downtowner Motor Inn, Hot Springs, Garland County, Arkansas



Google earth

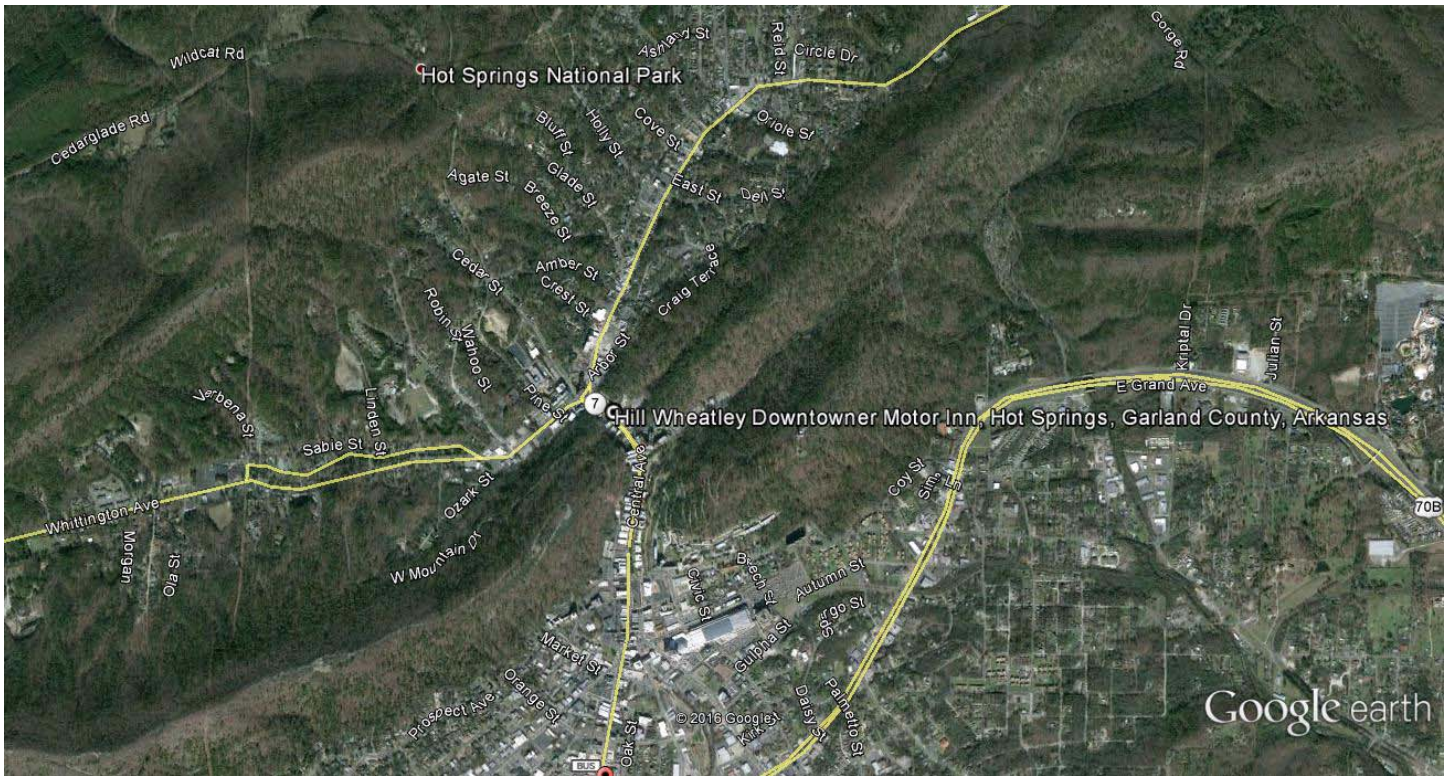


UTM

NAD 1983

Zone: 15 Easting: 494964 Northing: 3819606

Hill Wheatley Downtowner Motor Inn, Hot Springs, Garland County, Arkansas



Google earth

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UTM

NAD 1983

Zone: 15 Easting: 494964 Northing: 3819606



Town-Town
HOTEL
& SPA

THE SPRINGS
HOTEL & SPA

THE SPRINGS
HOTEL & SPA



MORITA
terraza

THE SPRINGS
HOTEL & SPA

Who will
YOU
choose
to be?
ASISA



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ASISA

ASISA















NO
PARKING



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
EVALUATION/RETURN SHEET

REQUESTED ACTION: NOMINATION

PROPERTY NAME: Hill Wheatley Downtowner Motor Inn

MULTIPLE NAME:

STATE & COUNTY: ARKANSAS, Garland

DATE RECEIVED: 8/12/16 DATE OF PENDING LIST: 9/02/16
DATE OF 16TH DAY: 9/19/16 DATE OF 45TH DAY: 9/27/16
DATE OF WEEKLY LIST:

REFERENCE NUMBER: 16000650

REASONS FOR REVIEW:

APPEAL: N DATA PROBLEM: N LANDSCAPE: N LESS THAN 50 YEARS: N
OTHER: N PDIL: N PERIOD: N PROGRAM UNAPPROVED: N
REQUEST: Y SAMPLE: N SLR DRAFT: N NATIONAL: N

COMMENT WAIVER: N

ACCEPT RETURN REJECT 9-27-2016 DATE

ABSTRACT/SUMMARY COMMENTS:

The nomination does a poor job of explaining significance under either A or C by not providing an adequate comparative context. However, the hotel is a good example of Modernist design within the context of Hot Springs, embodying the distinctive characteristics of the period more successfully than the stand alone Hotel down the block & the large addition to the majestic Hotel.

Also, while not specifically described, the Hotel's role in keeping the ^{Aristocrat} SPA/Resort Lifestyle of the town is important

RECOM./CRITERIA Accept A & C

REVIEWER J. Gabby DISCIPLINE _____

TELEPHONE _____ DATE _____

DOCUMENTATION see attached comments Y/N see attached SLR Y/N

If a nomination is returned to the nominating authority, the nomination is no longer under consideration by the NPS.



THE DEPARTMENT OF ARKANSAS
HERITAGE

May 27, 2016

Asa Hutchinson
Governor

Stacy Hurst
Director

Mr. Rick Stauder, Planning Coordinator
City of Hot Springs
P.O. Box 700
Hot Springs, AR 71902

Re: Hill Wheatley Downtowner Motor Inn – Hot Springs, Garland County

Dear Mr. Stauder *Pick*

We are pleased to inform you that the above referenced property will be considered by the State Review Board of the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program, an agency of the Department of Arkansas Heritage, for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places. The National Register of Historic Places is the federal government's official list of historic properties worthy of the preservation. Listing in the National Register of Historic Places provides recognition and assists in preserving our nation's heritage.

Listing of this property provides recognition of the community's historic importance and assures protective review of the federal projects that might adversely affect the character of the historic property.

Listing in the National Register does not mean that limitations will be placed on the property by the federal government. Public visitation rights are not required of property owners. The federal government will not attach covenants to the property or seek to acquire it.

We have enclosed a copy of the National Register nomination for your review. If you have any comments on the proposed nomination, please submit a letter with your comments, concerns, or concurrence to the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program at least 24 hours prior to the date of the State Review Board meeting.

You are invited to attend the State Review Board meeting at which the nomination will be considered. The board will begin meeting at 10:00 a.m. on Wednesday, August 3rd at the Arkansas State University Offices on the 6th Floor of the 501 Building at 501 Woodlane, in Little Rock. If you have any questions regarding the State Review Board meeting feel free to call Ralph Wilcox, Callie Williams or Travis Ratermann at (501) 324-9880.

Sincerely,

Frances McSwain

Frances McSwain
Director

- Arkansas Arts Council
- Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission
- Delta Cultural Center
- Historic Arkansas Museum
- Mosaic Templars Cultural Center
- Old State House Museum



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www.arkansaspreservation.com



THE DEPARTMENT OF ARKANSAS
HERITAGE

August 3, 2016

RECEIVED 2280

AUG 12 2016

Nat. Register of Historic Places
National Park Service

Asa Hutchinson
Governor

Stacy Hurst
Director

J. Paul Loether, Deputy Keeper and Chief
National Register and National Historic Landmark Programs
National Register of Historic Places
1201 Eye St. NW, 8th Fl.
Washington D.C. 20005

Arkansas Arts Council

Arkansas Natural
Heritage Commission

Arkansas State Archives

Delta Cultural Center

Historic Arkansas Museum

Mosaic Templars
Cultural Center

Old State House Museum

RE: Hill Wheatley Downtowner Motor Inn – Hot Springs,
Garland County, Arkansas

Dear Mr. Loether:

We are enclosing for your review the above-referenced nomination. The enclosed disk contains the true and correct copy of the documentation for the Hill Wheatley Downtowner Motor Inn. The Arkansas Historic Preservation Program has complied with all applicable nominating procedures and notification requirements in the nomination process.

If you need further information, please call Callie Williams of my staff at (501) 324-9789. Thank you for your cooperation in this matter.

Sincerely,

Stacy Hurst
State Historic Preservation Officer

SH:clw

Enclosure



ARKANSAS HISTORIC
PRESERVATION PROGRAM



National Historic
Preservation Act 1966-2016



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