

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

For NPS use only

**National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form**

received MAR 7 1985

date entered APR 4 1985

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

1. Name

historic Nathaniel Wheeler Memorial Fountain

and/or common same

2. Location

street & number Intersection Park & Fairfield avenues N/A not for publication

city, town Bridgeport N/A vicinity of

state Connecticut code 09 county Fairfield code 001

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status N/A	Present Use
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> public	<input type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture
<input type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input type="checkbox"/> commercial
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> educational
<input type="checkbox"/> site	Public Acquisition	Accessible	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial
	<u>N/A</u>	<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military
			<input type="checkbox"/> museum
			<input type="checkbox"/> park
			<input type="checkbox"/> private residence
			<input type="checkbox"/> religious
			<input type="checkbox"/> scientific
			<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> other: <u>Fountain</u>

4. Owner of Property

name City of Bridgeport

street & number City Hall, 45 Lyon Terrace

city, town Bridgeport N/A vicinity of state Connecticut

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Town Clerk's Office

street & number 45 Lyon Terrace

city, town Bridgeport state Connecticut

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title State Register of Historic Places has this property been determined eligible? yes no

date 1985 federal state county local

depository for survey records Connecticut Historical Commission, 59 S. Prospect St.

city, town Hartford state Connecticut

7. Description

Condition

excellent
 good
 fair

deteriorated
 ruins
 unexposed

Check one

unaltered
 altered

Check one

original site
 moved date _____

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

The Nathaniel Wheeler Memorial Fountain stands at the intersection of Fairfield and Park avenues. It was built in 1912-1913 and was designed by prominent American sculptor Gutzon Borglum. The fountain stands on a triangular parcel of land and a concrete pad forms the base of the fountain and raises it above the level of the street. The fountain consists of four elements; the central figure and main fountain, set in the center of the parcel and three smaller watering troughs, one at each angle of the parcel. The central figure is that of a mermaid, executed in bronze. She faces east, and in her right hand she holds aloft a lamp, somewhat in the fashion of the Statue of Liberty. With her left hand she holds a baby, also a mermaid, to her breast. The baby, rather than being in a position to suckle, is set face up, with its back against the mermaid's body. The mermaid's tail is coiled around the base of the figure, and entwined in the tail are two dolphins. The mermaid stands on a shallow round base raised above the surface of a round polished granite pool. Around the rim of the pool the faces of four children are executed in high relief. Water issues from the mouths of these children, as if they were playfully blowing bubbles. The round pool is raised above a larger oval pool on a fluted granite base. Around the metal base of the oval pool is incised "Nathaniel Wheeler 1820-1893". The central section of the fountain is paved in terrazzo. A polished granite watering trough is located at each of the three angles of the parcel. The shapes of these watering troughs echo the triangular shape of the angles of the parcel. Each trough is ornamented with a different figure. A mother seal flanked by two seal pups is carved in high relief on the northwest, three seahorses are on the northeast, and a bust-length figure of a child, with its arms outstretched, is on the south trough. In each case, the water source issues from the central figure. Curiously designed hitching posts border the edge of the fountain between watering troughs. The hitching posts are executed in bronze, and represent tortoises and fish. The fish is represented as if it were jumping out of the water, and is in turn surmounted by a second tortoise on the tip of its nose. The base of each hitching post is paved in a circular pattern in small square tiles.

The original appearance of the fountain was much as it is today, except for its surroundings. Today, the busy intersection is one used mostly by cars, rather than horses, and it is on the fringe of the central downtown core. In the early twentieth century, the fountain was surrounded by a more residential neighborhood.

¹David Palmquist, Bridgeport A Pictorial History (Virginia Beach: The Donning Co., 1981, p.83).

8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below			
<input type="checkbox"/> prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-prehistoric	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> community planning	<input type="checkbox"/> landscape architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> religion
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-historic	<input type="checkbox"/> conservation	<input type="checkbox"/> law	<input type="checkbox"/> science
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> literature	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> sculpture
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> social/
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input type="checkbox"/> humanitarian
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> theater
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> other (specify) Local history

Criteria A, B & C

Specific dates 1912-1913 **Builder/Architect** Gutzon Borglum

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

The Nathaniel Wheeler Memorial Fountain was designed by one of America's leading sculptors, Gutzon Borglum, the designer of Mount Rushmore (Criterion C). It is a memorial to one of Bridgeport's most prominent industrialists, Nathaniel Wheeler (Criterion B). The design of the fountain and its placement at a major intersection also reflects the influence of the City Beautiful movement during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Criterion A).

The Wheeler Memorial Fountain is a rare and curious pedestrian delight. Unique in Bridgeport, and unusual in terms of public sculpture in Connecticut, the fountain represents far more than a physical landmark to Bridgeport. Designed by Gutzon Borglum, one of the country's leading late nineteenth and early twentieth-century sculptors, the fountain reflects not only Borglum's European training, but the sophisticated tastes of Wheeler's wealthy, well educated and well travelled children. Bridgeport's gritty factories and mill villages are in direct contrast to the polished work of art executed by one of the country's leading sculptors in a manner typical of European academic sculpture.

The central bronze figure of the mermaid is expressionistic and imaginative, typical of Borglum's work. The use of bronze produces strong contours. Weathering has changed the color of the material and has clouded its reflective quality, diminishing the contrast of light and dark that would have been obvious when the fountain was newly erected. Borglum enhanced the volume of the figure by treating the surface with slight nuances rather than a wealth of detail. The curved lines of the figure, its draperies and the fish circling the base give the sculpture a dynamic effect, capturing the vitality of the mermaid as she upholds the lamp while clutching her baby. The bronze figure contrasts texturally with the mirror-polished surface of the granite bowl in which it stands and the water which surrounds it. The symmetrical placement of the central fountain and its subsidiary watering troughs reflects the influence of Classicism, but the bronze fish-and-tortoise hitching posts playfully break with Classical tradition.

The fountain was the mid-career work of maverick American sculptor Gutzon Borglum. Born in Idaho in 1867, Borglum attended college in Kansas and later studied at the Mark Hopkins Art Institute in San Francisco. In the late 1880s he went to Paris to study painting, but soon relinquished his painterly ambitions to study sculpture. He entered the Académie Julian and studied under Mercié. During his six years abroad he was influenced strongly by the work of Rodin. Also, his interest in portraying animals was encouraged.

9. Major Bibliographical References

Craven, Wayne, Sculpture in America, New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1968.
Palmquist, David, Bridgeport A Pictorial History, Virginia Beach: The Donning Co., 1981.

10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of nominated property less than 1 acre

Quadrangle name Bridgeport

Quadrangle scale 1:24,000

UTM References

A

1	8	65	0	0	90	45	59	4	8	0
Zone	Easting		Northing							

B

Zone	Easting		Northing							

C

D

E

F

G

H

Verbal boundary description and justification

See enclosed map.

List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

state N/A code county code

state N/A code county code

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Kate Ohno, Preservation Consultant; edited by John Herzan, National Register Coordinator

organization Connecticut Historical Commission date 1984

street & number 59 S. Prospect St. telephone (203) 566-3005

city or town Hartford state Connecticut

12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

national state local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

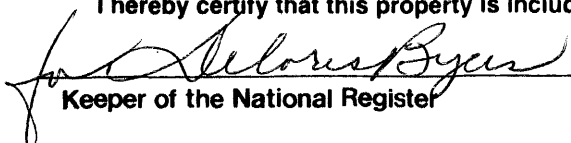
State Historic Preservation Officer signature



title Director, Connecticut Historical Commission date 2/26/85

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I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register


Keeper of the National Register

date 4/4/85

Attest:

date

Chief of Registration

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

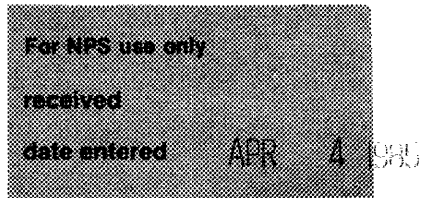
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In 1893 he returned to the United States where his "Indian Scouts" was exhibited at the Columbian Exposition. A second trip to Europe was made, but by 1902 he had returned and was established in New York City. Borglum exhibited no less than eighteen sculptures at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition of 1904. Borglum's imaginative works and ability to capture the emotions and vibrancy of his subjects, as well as their forms, made him one of the period's most prominent sculptors. Despite Borglum's criticism of American mainstream sculpture, he did not lack major commissions. He designed the "Twelve Apostles" for St. John the Divine Church in New York City and a marble head of Lincoln for the Library of Congress. His best known commission was his design for the heads of Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt on Mt. Rushmore, South Dakota. As well as designing and executing sculptural works Borglum also taught his art, and numbered among his students were Malvina Hoffman and Isamu Noguchi. Borglum continued to teach and sculpt until his death in 1941.²

The Wheeler Memorial Fountain design was undertaken by Borglum in the middle of his long and varied career. The fountain's design appears to have had a very personal meaning to him, as he modelled the baby held by the mermaid after his son, Lincoln, who was later baptized in the fountain.³ The fountain was Borglum's first documented commission in Bridgeport. It was followed by the reredos in St. John's Episcopal Church, located just north of the fountain.

Unfortunately, no definitive description of Borglum's works has been published to date, although one is being prepared. Therefore, it is difficult to assess both Borglum's place in the history of American sculpture and the fountain's place in the context of his oeuvre. However, it seems clear that the fountain is a rare example of the work of a nationally recognized sculptor in Bridgeport and that few public sculptures of this genre exist in Connecticut.

History

The Nathaniel Wheeler Memorial Fountain was erected in 1912-1913 and was given to the city by the children of Nathaniel Wheeler, a prominent Bridgeport citizen. Nathaniel Wheeler (1820-1893) was a leading industrialist with a world-wide reputation. He was one of the principals in a firm, Wheeler & Wilson Manufacturing Co., established in 1853, which was a major competitor of the Singer Sewing Maching Co. during the early days of sewing machines. Wheeler was president and general manager of this company until his death in 1893. As well as his business interests, Wheeler was an inventor and a patron of other inventors. He held the patents for a variety of wood fillers, power transmitters, refrigerators, a ventilating system for railroad cars, and a number of devices relating

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to sewing machines. In 1856 Wheeler moved his factory to Bridgeport where he became involved in the business, civic, and social affairs of the growing city. He was an incorporator and trustee of the People's Savings Bank, a director of the Bridgeport City Bank, the Bridgeport Hydraulic Co., the Bridgeport Horse Railroad Co., the Fairfield Rubber Co., the Willimantic Linen Co., and the New York, New Haven and Hartford Railroad. Wheeler was the founder and first president of the Seaside Club and a member of the Bridgeport Board of Trade and Board of Education. He served on the building committees of Bridgeport High School, the Fairfield County Court House and St. John's Episcopal Church. The directing commissioner, as well as the chief donor for Seaside Park, Wheeler was much concerned with the quality of life in Bridgeport. He encouraged the improvement of Mountain Grove Cemetery and was both a member and a main supporter of the Fairfield County Historical Society and the Bridgeport Scientific Society. Wheeler's civic activities extended outside the boundaries of Fairfield County, and he has been praised as the most active member of the commission charged with the construction of the State Capitol in Hartford. Wheeler was also involved in state politics. He sat on the Common Council of Bridgeport from 1866 until 1872, represented Bridgeport in the House of Representatives, and in 1873-1874 was a State Senator. Wheeler's reputation as a scientist and a leader of industry extended well beyond Connecticut. He was decorated at the World's Exposition of 1873 in Vienna and the Knight's Cross of the Imperial Order of Francis Josef and at the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1889 he was made a Chevalier de la Legion d'Honneur. Wheeler was twice married; his first wife was Huldah Bradley of Watertown, who died in 1857. After the death of his first wife he married Mary E. Chrissy of New Canaan, who survived him. His eldest son, Samuel H. Wheeler, was the head of the Wheeler & Wilson factory in Chicago and like his father, a leading businessman of Bridgeport and the president of Wheeler & Wilson after his father's death.

The Wheeler family was a wealthy and cultured one. After Mrs. Wheeler's death in 1910, her children gave a memorial, in the form of a rood screen, to St. John's Episcopal Church, just north of the fountain. The selection of a memorial for Mr. Wheeler was a larger task, but in 1912 a decision was made as to the form of the memorial. In June 1912, the contract for the bronze casting of the main figure was given to Gorham & Co. of New York. Municipal appropriations were made at the same time to provide water and sewer connections for the fountain as well as a concrete foundation.⁵

By April, 1913, the fountain was nearing completion. The director of Public Works for the City of Bridgeport, J. A. Courtade, claimed that it would be "one of the finest fountains in the country." Early in the month the bronze figure was placed in position. The Bridgeport Post described it in these terms: "It is of heroic size and represents a mermaid standing with uplifted right arm clasping a little baby mermaid in her left arm

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In her right hand she carries a torch which will comprise an arc light to shed its rays about the fountain." On April 19th the fountain was dedicated. Mrs. E. W. Harral, daughter of Nathaniel Wheeler, presented the deed to the property to Mayor C. B. Wilson, The fountain was presented by Samuel H. Wheeler, Archer Crissy Wheeler, William B. Wheeler and Mrs. Harral, Nathaniel Wheeler's surviving children. Mrs. Harral, as the spokeswoman for the family, related their choice of memorial to her father's interest in improving the appearance of the city.⁶

Thus, it was appropriate that the fountain became the focus of a group of proposed improvements in the neighborhood. In 1915 the Bridgeport City Plan Commission's first report on the beautification of Bridgeport was published. Besides addressing the placement of major buildings in the central downtown core, it proposed plans for grouping buildings important street intersections, like the junction of Fairfield and Park Avenues, where the fountain was located. In the following year the plan was refined and called for a major development of the fountain intersection. Working with the established presence of St. John's Episcopal Church on the northwest corner of the intersection, and the island formed by the fountain just south of the church, the commission recommended the creation of two other park-like traffic islands west of the fountain. The church was to be flanked on the west by the city club, with a new public library building to be constructed on the block west of the traffic islands, and a new city hall, fire station, and post office to be built to the east of the fountain and traffic islands. The plan was never carried out, but the fountain remains an important Bridgeport landmark, and a fitting memorial to one of its most prominent citizens.

End Notes

¹Wayne Craven, Sculpture in America (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1968, p. 488).

²Ibid, pp. 489-491; 561

³Letter from Lincoln Borglum to the author dated January 17, 1984, on deposit at the Bridgeport Public Library. See also David Palmquist, Bridgeport A Pictorial History (Virginia Beach: The Donning Co., 1981, p. 83).

⁴Commemorative and Biographical Record of Fairfield County (Chicago: J. B. Beers, 1899, pp. 8-10). See also Lynn Winfield Wilson, History of Fairfield County (Chicago: S. J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1929, V.2, pp. 5-10). See also Reverend Samuel Orcutt, History of the Old Town of Stratford and Bridgeport (Fairfield County Historical Society: 1886, pp. 733 & 787). See also Clipping File, Bridgeport Public Library.

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End Notes (cont'd.)

⁵Bridgeport Post (Bridgeport), June 4, 1912.

⁶Ibid, April 5, 1913, April 19, 1913 and April 21, 1913.

⁷John Nolan, Better City Planning for Bridgeport (n.p., 1916, pp. 17 & 30).

Nathaniel Wheeler Memorial Fountain
Bridgeport, Connecticut

Scale: 1" = 80'

