

National Register of Historic Places  
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*see*  
Narragansett Pier  
Item number 7 *WRA*

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featuring long verandas and a roofline interrupted by turrets, dormers, and cupolas (see photo #17). The building housed dining rooms, lounges, a billiard hall, and ballroom. The Casino grounds held an "Italian garden," tennis courts, a bowling alley and rifle gallery. Fire destroyed the structure in 1900 leaving only the round stone towers, connected by a broad arch spanning Ocean Road. The roof and interior of "The Towers" were restored in 1910, and again in 1965 following another fire. The Towers, a major landmark in the area, was listed on the National Register in 1969 and is now used as an office and tourist information center by the Narragansett Chamber of Commerce. A grassy expanse along Exchange Street, maintained by the town as Memorial Park, occupies the Casino's former site.

Construction of a U.S. Coast Guard Lifesaving Station in 1888 just south of the Casino added another handsome structure to the waterfront. It, too, was designed by McKim, Mead and White, and its rock-faced granite walls match the Towers. It contained a boat storage area on the first floor and quarters for the station crew under the gable above. Removed from active service in 1937, it has been rather insensitively altered for use as a restaurant, yet its form and materials still complement the neighboring Towers. The station was added to the National Register on June 30, 1976.

INVENTORY:

Structures and sites in the Towers Historic District are considered to be contributing if representing the period during which Narragansett Pier grew into a summer resort colony (late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) and/or complementing the visual or historical continuity of the district. All structures in the district are wood frame unless otherwise indicated.

Contributing Structures and Sites

Exchange Street

Memorial Park - from Mathewson Street to Ocean Road: The site was purchased by the town for the sum of \$25,000 in 1931, and covers the site of the original Narragansett Casino, destroyed by fire in 1900. One tower of the Casino, still supporting an arched promenade over Ocean Road, rests on the park's eastern edge. The park also holds a granite memorial to members of the Narragansett Pier Fire Department, a fountain composed of four cavorting dolphins, and a flag pole supported by a tripartite concrete monument. The outer sections of the monument contain bronze plaques listing the World War II local honor role; the central panel features a high relief sculpture of a soldier designed by Florence Brevoort Kane, an area native who studied and spent most of her life in France. The park received its present name in 1950.

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- 18 The Wagon Wheel (probably 1822): A 2½-story, gable-roofed dwelling with a gabled ell on the south side, a center chimney, a veranda, and a Federal doorway with side lights, surmounted by an entablature with consoles. This is probably the house, mentioned in J.R. Cole's History of Washington and Kent Counties, Rhode Island, that George Brown built in 1822 opposite the North Pier. It was later moved to the site of Pier Pharmacy (#14 Mathewson); circa 1890 it was turned 90° and again moved, this time one lot south to its present site.
- 18A Tally Ho (ca. 1890): A 2½-story cubical structure located on a small driveway behind Wagon Wheel (#18). The truncated hipped roof holds gable-roofed dormers, the front (northern) one displaying a Palladian window. A late Shingle Style veranda incorporating paired colonettes projects from the building on the north and east; the eastern section has been enclosed. A gable-roofed ell and other additions are attached to the south.
- 20 House (ca. 1875): A 2-story, clapboarded structure composed of rectangular masses, banded by a modillion cornice which supports the projecting eaves of a flat roof. An open veranda with gracefully curved brackets (somewhat obscured by wooden trellises) and jigsaw ornamentation on the balustrade partially surrounds the first floor. A tower, modestly decorated by two bands of scalloped shingles, is integrated into the building's bulk and stands only slightly taller than the house.
- 22 Ninigret Cottage (ca. 1875, additions ca. 1885): A 2½-story, gable-roofed residence, "L" in plan, originally covered by clapboards but now shingled. Beneath the north gable there remains part of the decorative bracing which was once topped by a finial and found on all gable ends.

Ocean Road

- 36 The Towers (1883-86): A 3½-story, stone structure consisting of two 3-story blocks with semicircular terminations, surmounted by hipped and conical roof forms and linked by a hip-roofed gallery supported by segmental arches which span Ocean Road. It was designed by McKim, Mead and White of New York, one of America's most prominent late 19th-century architectural firms, as an entrance to the Narragansett Casino, a rambling Shingle Style structure which was one of the architects' foremost achievements. The Casino was the center of social life for the local summer colony until its destruction by fire in 1900. The Towers was rebuilt in 1910 according to plans drawn by J. Howard Adams. After being damaged by fire in 1965, it was acquired by the town and has undergone rehabilitation

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- for use by the Chamber of Commerce. The Towers is an important historical relic, recalling the Pier's former popularity as a summer resort for people from all over the United States. Due to its prominent location and monumental design it is a key landmark and serves as a symbol of the town's civic identity.
- 40 U.S. Lifesaving Station, now called the Coast Guard House (1888): The original section of this building, a 1½-story granite structure with a semicircular end and a gable roof with semi-conical terminus, is now encased in unsympathetic concrete-block additions. Supposedly modeled after a lifesaving station in England, it was the first such building in America to be built of stone and was designed by McKim, Mead and White. Its form and materials harmonize with those of the nearby Towers, an earlier structure by the same architectural firm. The Coast Guard House served as a United States Lifesaving Station from the time of its completion until 1937. It is currently used as a restaurant.
- 41 Sea Lawn (ca. 1875): This 1½-story structure clad in vertical board siding (originally clapboarded) has a mansard roof pierced by gabled dormers. On the north side behind a 2-story stair tower is a large polygonal bay. There are smaller 2-story bays on the other sides, the eastern one centered over the front entrance, and an ell extends from the rear. A veranda along the east side has been enclosed in a very unsympathetic manner. Now an office and residence, this building was constructed to be "The Reading Room," a men's club, and was located on Mathewson Street with the side containing the tower and large bay facing front (west). It was moved to its present location in the late 1890s.
- 51 Hopewell (1870s, 1890s): A 2-story, gable-roofed frame dwelling with a veranda and a broad front gambrel containing a central Palladian window set under a shingled hood which swells out from the wall surface. Early photos show that the facade of this house originally had a pair of gable-roofed dormers breaking up through the eaves; the front gambrel is a later addition. This house belonged to Dr. Charles Hitchcock of New York, a prominent summer resident who played an instrumental role in founding the Narragansett Pier Improvement Association and the Narragansett Casino Association. Hitchcock was Charles F. McKim's personal physician and may have helped to obtain for him the commission to design the Narragansett Casino. The additions to Hopewell may have been designed by William Gibbons Preston of Boston. Howard Lapsley, Hitchcock's father-in-law, had Preston design a house for him down off the Ocean Road extension, and Preston's papers contain references which seem

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to indicate that Lapsley may have hired him to renovate Hope-  
well in the early 1890s.

- 61 Miramar (1889-90): A 2½-story, gable-roofed, Shingle Style dwelling with an ell on the west side. It has a veranda with a conical-roofed semicircular end, gable-roofed dormers, a loggia at the northeast corner, and an oriel window on the south side. It was built as a summer residence by Dr. Bache McE. Emmett of New York on the site of the Narragansett House, the first hotel at the Pier.

Taylor Avenue

- 7 House (ca. 1890): A 2½-story building with clapboards covering the first floor and shingles above. The flank gable roof contains a monitor dormer. A second-story, shallow oriel centered in the front facade sits atop a small entry hood, supported by fluted posts, which covers a Colonial Revival doorway. A sloping roof emerges from the east end to protect an open veranda.
- 13 House (ca. 1875): A 2-story, gable-roofed building sheathed in clapboards, with a pavilion projecting on the front (south). The roof of the western section slopes down to the first floor on the front facade. A 1-story screened porch with delicately arched braces and a simple rail balustrade is attached to the front of the pavilion and another to the front of the eastern section.
- 17 House (ca. 1875): A 2-story, clapboarded building which has an "L" plan and is covered by a low-pitched hip roof. Beneath the eaves run a bracketed cornice and entablature with molding separating the plain architrave and frieze. The roof of the veranda on the east side is supported by simple brackets. The detailing is similar to 20 Mathewson Street.

Non-Contributing Structures

Mathewson Street

- 14 Pier Pharmacy (ca. 1970): A 1-story, concrete block rectangle faced with stucco on the front (west) and board and batten siding on the remaining elevations. Three triangular bays jut from the north side. A mock-mansard roof has been applied to the north and west sides. A narrow blacktop parking lot separates the building from the street.

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DATES: Late 19th and early 20th centuries

SIGNIFICANCE: Architecture, Resort/Recreation

A passion for seaside holidays swept the United States and other countries during the late nineteenth century propelling Narragansett Pier into national prominence as a major summer resort. Its fine beach attracted thousands of visitors, and the structures in the Towers Historic District are physical manifestations of the growth which resulted. Some visitors found accommodations in cottages, such as those along Mathewson and Taylor Streets; others were housed in hotels. In the mid-1880s construction of the Casino, the towers of which remain flanking Ocean Road, radically changed the Pier both by its imposing physical presence and by centralizing social life. The new order was short-lived. In 1900 a fire destroyed the Casino and the social ambience it served. Ironically, this echoed a decline in popularity of Narragansett Pier among long-term guests who felt inundated by growing numbers of day visitors, conveyed by improved transportation. While many traces of the late nineteenth-century heyday of the Pier have disappeared, structures in the Towers Historic District survive as a fragment of that era.

The site of the Towers Historic District has served as a center of development for the area since shortly after 1780, when John Robinson built a pier near the present site of the Towers to provide local farmers with a more convenient means of exporting and importing goods. It is to this wharf that Narragansett Pier owes its name. By 1801, when Robinson's son, Benjamin, inherited the property, a house and a store had also been built here. The pier was destroyed in the Great Gale of 1815 and was rebuilt by Rowland Hazard, who had purchased it from Robinson five years earlier. The property changed hands two or three times, finally coming into the possession of George Brown in 1822. At that time, Brown built a house on the site later occupied by the original Casino. This is probably the house which now stands at 18 Mathewson Street, used for many years as a summer rental cottage.

The pier continued to pass through a series of owners and lessees, one of whom, Jonathan N. Hazard, erected a planing mill, another wharf, and a steam gristmill (the first in the area) around 1850. In the meantime the South Pier area was being developed, stimulated by construction of a wharf in the early 1870s when the planing mill was moved from North Pier to South Pier.

This loss of commerce at North Pier was more than compensated for by a new, and soon frenetically expanding, industry: tourism. Proximity to the beach and community center made cottages in the Towers Historic District attractive to summer guests. Hopewell at 51 Ocean Road was the summer home of Dr. Charles Hitchcock of New York, an active Pier booster involved in the Narragansett Pier Improvement Association and

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the Narragansett Casino Association. Dr. Hitchcock was Charles McKim's personal physician and may have helped him obtain the commission to design the Casino. The doctor introduced many people to the Pier and thus encouraged many new investments in the community.

Cottages, hotels, shops, and in 1885, the Casino, formed a dense concentration of development along the shore in the last half of the nineteenth century. The intersection of Exchange and Mathewson Streets was a major hub of retail activity for the area. It received a setback in 1900, however, when the fire that consumed the Casino damaged many commercial buildings and destroyed the deluxe Rockingham Hotel, located across Exchange Street from the Casino. A resurgence of the Pier's vitality included construction of a new casino in 1905 and improvement of roads in the area. Although long-term summer visitors continued to come, they were soon outnumbered by day tourists, and one by one the old hotels disappeared. Among the last survivors was the Massasoit, directly across Mathewson Street from the district, which was destroyed in the early 1970s. The commercial center gradually became rundown. Natural causes sometimes accelerated deterioration: the 1938 hurricane annihilated a number of structures (although none were in the district) and shredded the surface and foundation of Ocean Road as well. The retaining wall along the ocean and a stone wall lining the west side of the road date from the subsequent reconstruction. An urban renewal project in 1971-72 completed the clearance of dilapidated buildings from land north of the district and built the nearby Pier Village, a residential and retail complex. The twentieth century has thus witnessed a nearly total transformation of Narragansett Pier's core.

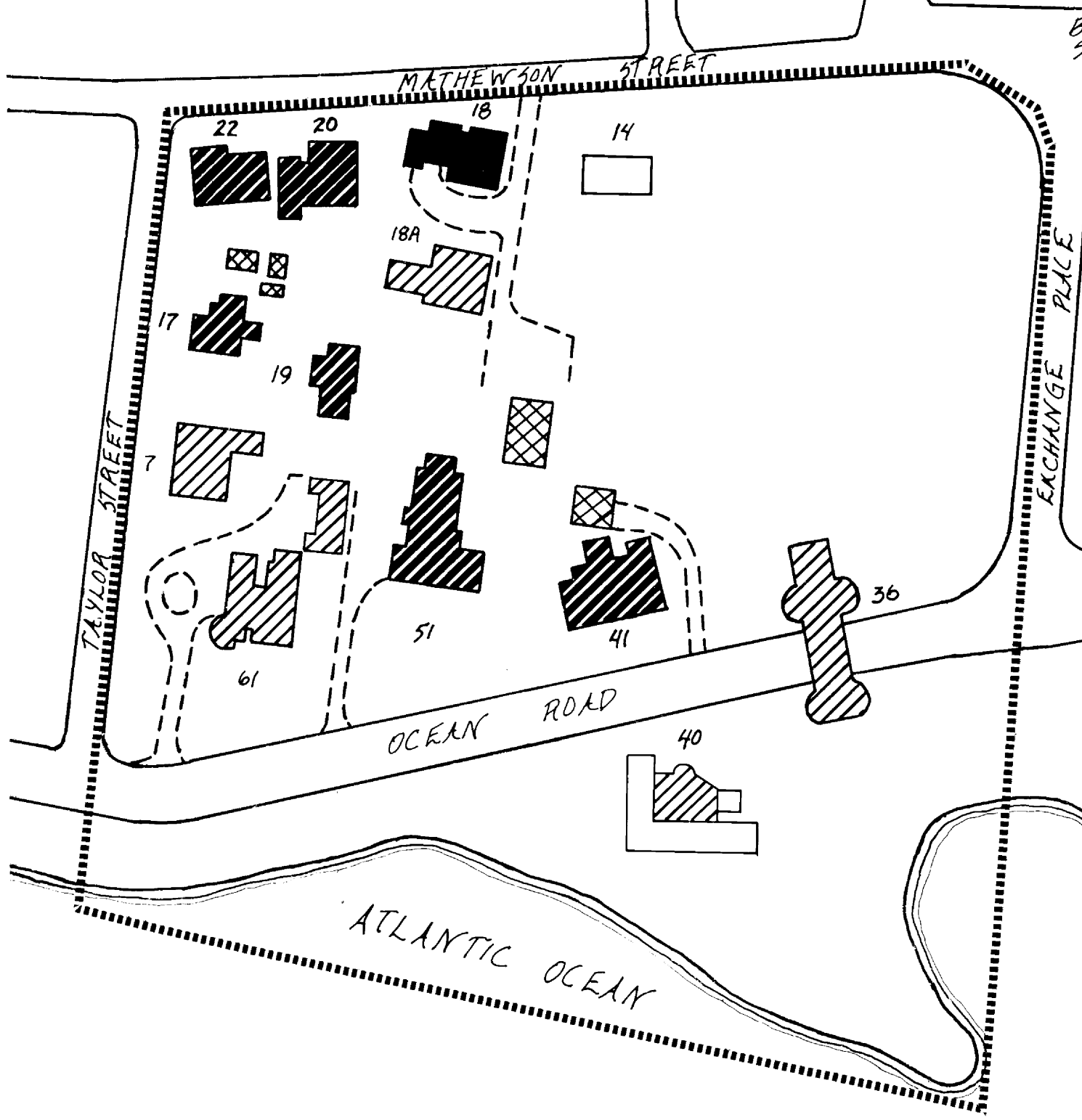
The cluster of nineteenth-century structures in the Towers Historic District have survived as a fragment of an earlier, and very different, era. The Towers and U.S. Coast Guard Lifesaving Station, both by the firm McKim, Mead and White, are of great architectural significance by virtue of their design and their visual prominence in Narragansett Pier. The Towers and their connecting arch are the only remnants of the Narragansett Casino, built between 1883 and 1886. The Casino with its heavy, horizontal massing, rough-textured materials, and broad arch displayed design elements usually associated with Henry Hobson Richardson, in whose office both McKim and White had worked a decade earlier. It is similar in spirit to a building by the same architects in a neighboring resort dating from a few years earlier: the Newport Casino. Adjacent to the Towers is the Coast Guard Lifesaving Station, supposedly modeled after a station in England. Constructed in 1888, its form and materials were chosen to harmonize with the Narragansett Casino. Despite significant alterations suffered by both buildings, they maintain a sense of their original character and are important physical links to the community's late nineteenth-century growth.

(See Continuation Sheet #40)

# Towers Historic District Narragansett, R.I.

- Federal
- ▨ Early Victorian (1860-1881)
- ▧ Late Victorian (1882-1910)
- ▩ Early 20th Century (1910-1930)
- Non-Contributing

*Sketch Plan - not to scale*



MAY 1982  
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