

# DATA SHEET

PH 0694746

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

FOR NPS USE ONLY

RECEIVED JAN 8 1979

DATE ENTERED MAR 9 1979

## NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM

SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS  
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS

### 1 NAME

HISTORIC

Royal Riblet House and Complex

AND/OR COMMON

### 2 LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER

E of Spokane rd

Fruit Hill Road at Riblet Point

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CITY, TOWN

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

Spokane

X VICINITY OF

STATE

CODE

COUNTY

CODE

Washington

Spokane

63

### 3 CLASSIFICATION

#### CATEGORY

- DISTRICT
- BUILDING(S)
- STRUCTURE
- SITE
- OBJECT

#### OWNERSHIP

- PUBLIC
- PRIVATE
- BOTH
- PUBLIC ACQUISITION**
- IN PROCESS
- BEING CONSIDERED

#### STATUS

- OCCUPIED
- UNOCCUPIED
- WORK IN PROGRESS
- ACCESSIBLE**
- YES: RESTRICTED
- YES: UNRESTRICTED
- NO

#### PRESENT USE

- AGRICULTURE
- MUSEUM
- COMMERCIAL
- PARK
- EDUCATIONAL
- PRIVATE RESIDENCE
- ENTERTAINMENT
- RELIGIOUS
- GOVERNMENT
- SCIENTIFIC
- INDUSTRIAL
- TRANSPORTATION
- MILITARY
- OTHER:

### 4 OWNER OF PROPERTY

NAME

Estate of Mildred Riblet

STREET & NUMBER

Rt. 2 Box 150

CITY, TOWN

Spokane

VICINITY OF

STATE

Washington 99207

### 5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE,  
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

Spokane County Courthouse

STREET & NUMBER

W. 1116 Broadway

CITY, TOWN

Spokane

STATE

Washington

### 6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE

Washington State Inventory of Historic Places

DATE

1976

FEDERAL STATE COUNTY LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR  
SURVEY RECORDS

111 W. 21st Avenue KL-11

CITY, TOWN

Olympia

STATE

Washington 98504

# 7 DESCRIPTION

## CONDITION

EXCELLENT  
 GOOD  
 FAIR

DETERIORATED  
 RUINS  
 UNEXPOSED

## CHECK ONE

UNALTERED  
 ALTERED

## CHECK ONE

ORIGINAL SITE  
 MOVED DATE \_\_\_\_\_

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### DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The Royal Riblet House perches on the edge of a massive cliff that drops 435 feet to the Spokane River. The large house, with suggestion of mediterranean styling, commands an impressive view and itself is visible throughout the valley. To the eye of one below, the house appears to be a child's block left casually teetering on the cliff edge.

Although the house and all its associated buildings are at the top of the cliff, the estate also includes all of the cliff face down to Upriver Drive, which is near the river at this point. The lower face of the cliff is bare basalt, but the upper part is sparsely forested with pine and fir. Strong winds, channelled by the river valley, frequently blow through these trees and past the Royal Riblet House.

The entrance to the estate is marked by rock gate posts. These were originally lighted by large glass globes in the top of each rusticated pillar. The gates at this entrance were controlled electrically from the mansion. Beyond these gates is a private drive to the house. A two-story rock gatehouse straddles the road, which then curves to the main house. Other buildings in the circle created by the cliff and road are a rock office building, a storage building, and an open vista house that overlooks the cliff. A radio tower for the valley fire departments has been added in recent years. Those portions of the estate close to the cliff edge have been made secure with a 42-inch wall.

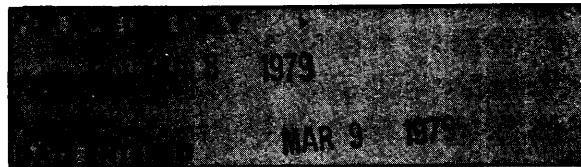
The overall impression the house gives is one of great height and massiveness. It is two stories with a basement which, on cliffside, is above ground. The mansion measures 24 by 58 feet and rests on a foundation of native stone which, at its base, is three feet thick. Stucco walls rise to a red tile hipped gable roof. Overhanging eaves are supported by brackets. A chimney is located centrally on the long west facade of the house. Fenestration, particularly on the east face, is notable for the size of the windows and the variety of shapes. A second story bay overhangs the first floor at each corner, and there is a wrap-around gallery at the basement level. Double garage doors are the principal feature of the north face.

Entry to the house is through rock arches of the portecochere. Wide arches, capped by a low gable roof, lead to the entrance on the east facade. A large brass bell, hung from the north arch of the portecochere, is rung for entry into the house. The remainder of the gallery, covered with a shed roof, has a rock wall pierced by seven segmental arches. Only the farthest is open to ground level, permitting crossing to a rock bridge east of the house. There are windows along the inner walls of the gallery. On the south, a rock veranda is overhung by the upper floors of the house. The veranda here has a pair of half arches to each side of a full length arch opening on a walled sunken garden and lawn.

The interior of this fourteen-room house is divided into three functional areas by the floors. The ground floor, or cellar, has utility and laundry rooms, refrigeration plant, fruit cellar, furnace room, water and oil tanks, as well as the double garage. The main floor has living areas dining room and kitchen, as well as enclosed porches at either end of the building. The upper floor has a unique arrangement of rooms. A large landing at the top of the stairs has a built-in linen closet opposite. A trio of windows in a stairstep arrangement provide light for the staircase. Each of the four bedroom suites is divided into an unheated, sparsely furnished

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**



**CONTINUATION SHEET**

ITEM NUMBER 7 PAGE 2

bedroom and a furnished, heated dressing room. One side of the floor has two single suites with a shared single bath. On the other side of the floor is a large suite with a double sleeping room, a single sleeping room, two dressing rooms and a shared bathroom with shower. Royal Riblet believed an unheated sleeping room was healthier than a heated one, but he enjoyed dressing in warmth. The connecting door between the two sections permitted one to select either warmth or chill.

Floors in the house are oak, as are the stairs; stair newels and the balustrade are of Wisconsin birch. Interior walls remain of ivory enamel on plaster and are trimmed with fir or oak. Steam radiators with grilled fronts provide heat for the rooms.

The living room has a vista of the Spokane Valley from three sides. French doors open to the enclosed porch above the sunken rock garden. A fireplace separates matching bookcases on either side. There are no angular floor corners in the room; oak moldings make a smooth slope from floor to base boards to complete the curved effect.

Other features of the house include a built-in china closet in the dining room with frameless glass doors on rollers. The kitchen has magnesite floors, and cupboards and drawers are also lined with magnesite to be dirt- and vermin-proof. White tile lines the kitchen to a height of three feet; baths are also tiled. All kitchen cabinets and sinks are at the efficiency level standard in post World War II housing. A ventilator for the range leads to a separate built-in chimney. A broom closet conceals a switch to start the well pump a half mile away.

Unusual features of the house include electrically operated garage doors, an internal telephone system, celotex insulation, built-in electric reading lamps in the bedroom suites, and electric foot warmers. Within the house is a 1,000 gallon water tank which is filled from a well 114' deep at the base of the cliff. Furnishing of the house and lawns was from designs of Royal Riblet.

The estate is also noteworthy for the great variety of other buildings on the grounds as well as extravagant fancies of landscaping. Most notable of the lesser estate structures is the three-room gate house. This two-story structure resembles a fanciful castle with turretted battlements. It is divided on ground level by the roadway arch. The walls are two feet thick and are double insulated. The interior contains a small cozy apartment originally intended for the gardener.

Another building of note is the vista house overlooking the cliff. An irregular polygon with a conical roof supported by steel rafters of varying length (to fit the shape of the foundation rock), the building is open to the air. The sides of the pagoda are inverted steel arches supported by the 42-inch rock wall.

Also on the estate is a three-room rock office. It housed the office and the unique tram that was used by the Riblets for 20 years. Descending some 1,900 feet to the

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INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

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CONTINUATION SHEET

ITEM NUMBER 7 PAGE 3

river and road below the cliff, it was last operated in 1945 and dismantled in 1956. Traveling 800 feet per minute, it was the only passenger tram with no winding drums, no moving cable, and no operator at either end. Using positive traction the five-passenger tram used a standard automobile motor, transmission, clutch and foot brake. The 1/3-mile-long cable terminated below the cliff near a double garage leased to the Riblets so that they might avoid using the steep cliff road.

Other sites of note near the house and cliff include the bridge that leads to the vista house and the croquet court. In addition to its use for croquet, the court was also used for winter skating and Easter sunrise services for Spokane Valley churches. Another intriguing attraction was the nine-hole miniature golf course with metal owls marking holes. Shrubbery has replaced this feature.

The most spectacular of the landscaping effects is the 25-foot-square checkerboard. Moves required a metal rod to lift the pieces. The board was created because the landscapers and Mr. Riblet found they could not remove a large boulder from one grassy area, so they turned it into a decorative feature. One of the vista points has a sun dial which shows not only the time, but air distances to the principle cities. A swimming pool with a 60,000-gallon capacity (and 20,000-gallon reservoir below the bluff), is located in the center of the landscaped drive. Tobogan and ski slopes, as well as a private air strip, were originally featured.

Alteration to the grounds have been slight. Principle changes have been the removal of the tramway, the addition of the fire departments' radio tower and the enclosing of the porches on the main floor of the house. Otherwise, the estate is intact.

Riblet Point is such a prominent location that the house receives much wider recognition than any other Spokane home. Despite the many changes that have passed in the Valley below, the house itself has remained an outstanding and remarkable landmark.

# 8 SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD	AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW			
<input type="checkbox"/> PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNITY PLANNING	<input checked="" 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 type="checkbox"/> SCULPTURE
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATION	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input type="checkbox"/> SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> ART	<input type="checkbox"/> ENGINEERING	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSIC	<input type="checkbox"/> THEATER
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCE	<input type="checkbox"/> EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> PHILOSOPHY	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNICATIONS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRY	<input type="checkbox"/> POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY)
		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> INVENTION		

SPECIFIC DATES 1924-1925 BUILDER/ARCHITECT Royal Riblet / George Keith

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Royal Riblet's home has dominated the Spokane Valley landscape since 1925. Innovative in design and its use of technology, the house reflects the ingenuity of its owner and planner, Royal Riblet, widely known Pacific Coast inventor. Riblet's inventions, from improvements in bicycles to tramways, were notable developments in the first half of the twentieth century. As executed by architect George Keith, the house is a picturesque and outstanding manifestation of Riblet's imagination.

Born in 1872 in Iowa and raised in Aberdeen, South Dakota, Royal Riblet was to follow in the footsteps of his distinguished brother, Byron C. Riblet, a University of Minnesota graduate engineer. B.C. Riblet arrived in Spokane the year before the great fire of August 1889. Principally a railroad engineer for the Washington and Idaho Railroad, operating to the Coeur D' Alene mines, B.C. Riblet early developed an interest in conveyor transportation, building his first tramway in 1897. Royal arrived in Spokane in 1892 to work as chain man for the city engineering department. By 1893 he had left the city for British Columbia where his brother Walter was U.S. Consul, and he did not return until 1903.

Although Royal, like B.C. Riblet, was principally an engineer and inventor, his interests were always broad. Prior to returning to Spokane in 1903, he became the South Dakota Bicycle champion at four different distances. While in Aberdeen, South Dakota, he manufactured bicycles as he did later in Nelson, British Columbia. A bicycle he designed for his young daughter in 1901, at one time the smallest pneumatic tired cycle in the world, was used for a time by the Barnum and Bailey circus. Working for Hescher Wire Rope Company, a blacksmith shop that manufactured trams for Canadian mines, Royal, like his brother, became interested in tram design. Royal Riblet first patented a tram in 1900.

In 1903, Royal Riblet listed himself in the city directory as a manufacturer of wire-rope tramways. In 1905, B.C. Riblet became President and Treasurer of Riblet Tramways with Royal as Vice-president. Although the tramways the company would build before World War II were principally for movement of materials, B.C. Riblet's design for carrying miners is dated 1906 (postdating by eight years one used in Alaska's Chilkoot Pass). The Riblet Company was one of the first tram manufacturers and Riblet trams were built all over the world. By the mid 1920's Royal and his brothers had constructed a 21-mile tram in Latin America. The range and expertise earned in the 1930's gave the company a world wide reputation. Today the concern is the largest single manufacturer of ski-lifts and similar equipment. The capital generated by the concern enabled company president, Byron Riblet, to build a magnificent estate on the Little Spokane River in 1910. Royal, in 1924, decided to build a country estate in one of the most inaccessible spots on the Spokane River.

# 9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Bird, Margaret and Coffey, Margaret. "Riblet Castle 1,900 feet above the Spokane". Spokesman-Review. March 11, 1956.

Kay, E.L. "Royal Riblet's castle in the sky". Spokesman-Review. July 21, 1968.

continued on attached sheet

# 10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY Approx. 6

QUADRANGLE NAME Greenacres, WA

QUADRANGLE SCALE 1:24,000

UTM REFERENCES

A 11 481310 5282520

B         

ZONE EASTING NORTHING

ZONE EASTING NORTHING

C         

D         

E         

F         

G         

H         

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION See Continuation Sheet

## LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES

STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE

# 11 FORM PREPARED BY

Ms. Patsy Garrett

NAME / TITLE

edited by J.H. Vandermeer

ORGANIZATION

Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation

DATE

September 1978

STREET & NUMBER

111 W. 21st Avenue

TELEPHONE

(206) 753-9685

CITY OR TOWN

Olympia

STATE

Washington 98504

# 12 STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION

THE EVALUATED SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PROPERTY WITHIN THE STATE IS:

NATIONAL X

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

*Jeanne M. Welch*

TITLE

*Dep. S.H.P.O.*

DATE

*12-25-78*

FOR NPS USE ONLY

I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PROPERTY IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

DATE

*3-9-79*

ATTEST:

*W. Ray Luce*

DATE

*3/8/79*

CHEF OF REGISTRATION

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CONTINUATION SHEET

ITEM NUMBER 8 PAGE 2

Royal Riblet severed his connection with the Riblet Company in 1935 and formed his own company, Airline Tramways. This company manufactured trams until World War II.

Royal Riblet's fortune came not only from his design of trams. At his death in 1960, he had over thirty separate patents in his name. Many of his inventions were simple improvements on existing ideas, but others were startlingly original. Best known of his inventions were a square-wheeled tractor, a mechanical parking garage and a tracklaying device that was used in World War II by the Armed Forces. Riblet continued an active life until his death in May 1960 at the age of 88.

Spokane is a city with many distinguished homes both old and new. The significance of the Royal Riblet mansion is not for luxury or even of its prominent and precarious location. Its fame is more justly derived from the innovative construction, furnishings and utilization of 1920's technology.

Royal Riblet had been impressed by the location of the cliff above the Spokane River since the 1890's, but, until the mid-1920's, technology to make use of the location for a residence was of a prohibitive cost. Royal roughed out the designs for the estate with architect George H. Keith. Keith, although not one of Spokane's best known architects, had undeniable talent. In 1922, the Weiss residence, designed by Keith and Harold C. Whitehouse, was named one of the finest houses in the city by the architectural jury chosen by the City Planning Commission. Keith, who designed in the city from 1907 to 1930, completed the Riblet mansion, in those last flamboyant days before the Depression.

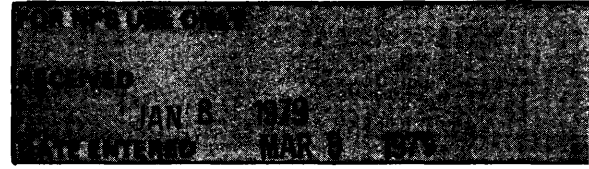
As executed by Keith, the mansion featured some highly unusual details. Riblet, like most Spokanites, had become accustomed to electricity as a part of everyday life since it was introduced in the city in the 1880's. He determined to make the fullest possible use of electricity in the house. From electrically controlled gates and lighted paths to garage doors and electric footwarmers, the house employed Spokane's surplus electricity extravagantly. The heating system--oil fired steam heat--was a concession to the realities of the remoteness of the house. Only one other house in the nation, according to Royal Riblet, equalled the amount of electric usage in 1925.

Interior details included such novel features as concave floor to wall transitions that permitted easy cleaning and the built-in ventilator shaft for the kitchen range. Another improvement in kitchen design was the use of efficiency level cabinets, counters, and sinks. Riblet insisted on practicality in the kitchen. Other innovations were the double lined water tanks, intercom system to all rooms, and picture windows throughout the house.

Although some of Riblet's plans were merely personal preference, as in the cold sleeping-warm dressing room suites, others had a serious impact on later design.

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**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**



CONTINUATION SHEET

ITEM NUMBER 8 PAGE 3

The most influential was Riblet's steel framed lawn furniture, widely imitated by the mid-1930's. The house and all its features were widely publicized in 1929, when the Spokane Chamber of Commerce arranged for Fox Films to make a newsreel of the estate. The wide showing of this film may explain the impact of Riblet's furniture design and convenience features in home building.

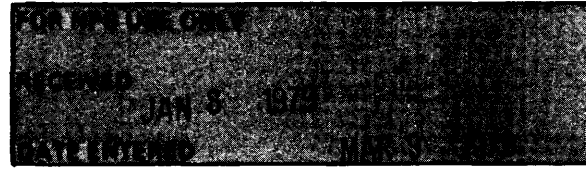
Most famed of the estate's features was the tramway. Run with an automotive motor, transmission, clutch, and brake the positive traction car ascended the cliff without an operator at either end and without moving cables. Despite the fact that the five-passenger tram has not been used since 1945 and was removed twenty years ago, most Spokane Valley residents mention it as a part of the Riblet house.

The house is by its setting a prominent landmark, but its true significance springs from the unique talents of its owner, Royal Riblet.



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**



CONTINUATION SHEET

ITEM NUMBER 9 PAGE 2

Selig, Raymond A. "Riblet home overlooking valley is marvel".  
Spokesman-Review Magazine. November 29, 1925.

Ulrich, John. "Story of Spokane's Famed Makers of Chairlifts is  
Entrepreneurial Tale of Great Idea". Argus. March 17, 1967.

Riblet Aerial Tramway. Spokane: Shaw & Borden, 1930.

"'Eagle's Nest' is Aerie for Tramway Man". Spokane Valley Herald.  
November 19, 1953.

"Passing of the Riblet tramway". Spokane Valley Herald. November 1, 1966.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**



**CONTINUATION SHEET**

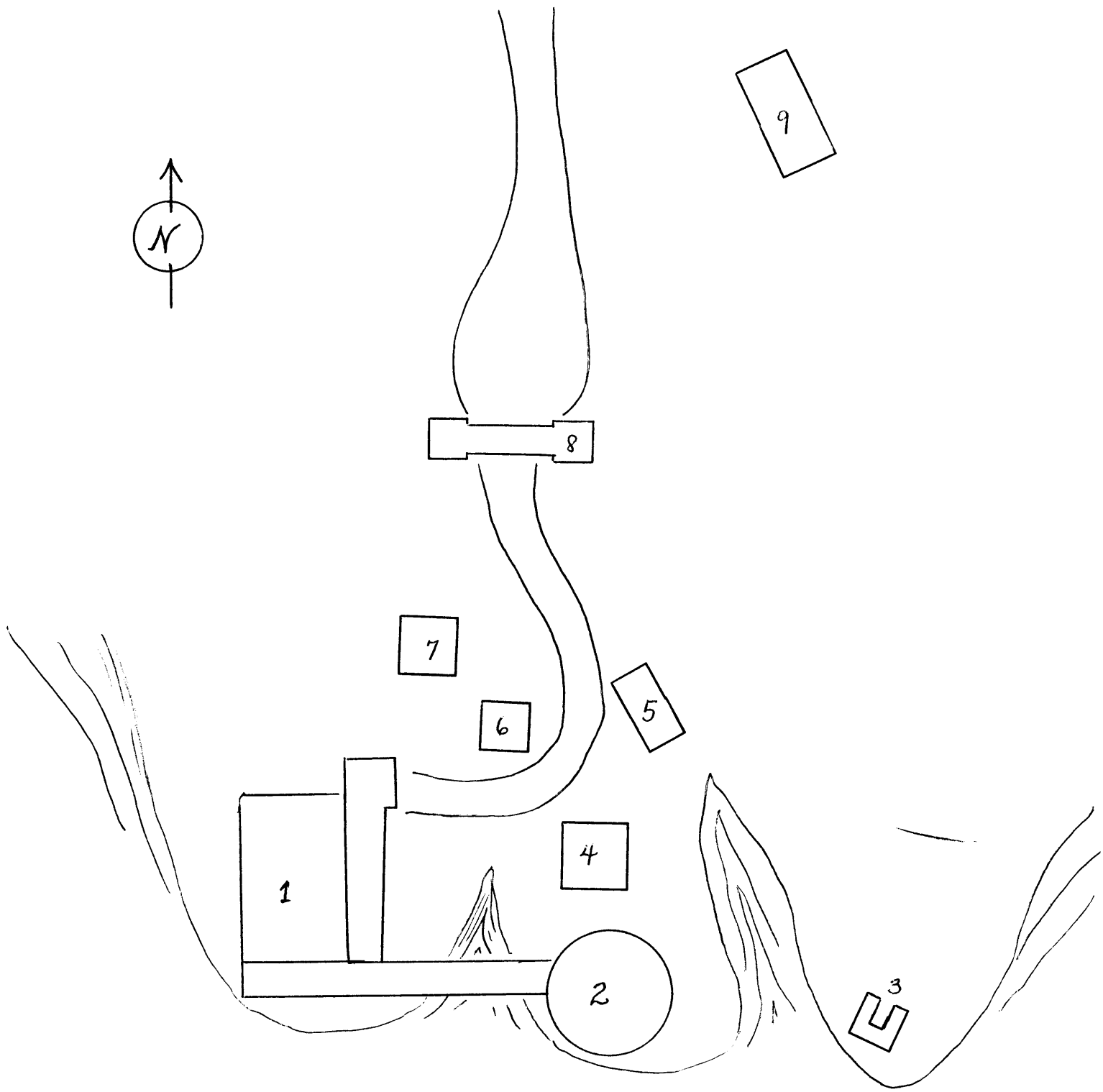
ITEM NUMBER 10

PAGE 2

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VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

That portion of the NE $\frac{1}{4}$  of Section 4, Township 25, Range 44E defined by a line starting at a point 600 feet south of the NW corner of the NE $\frac{1}{4}$ , extending due east to the 2,300-foot contour line, following that contour line to the west boundary of the NE $\frac{1}{4}$ , and thence along that boundary to the starting point.



**Sketch Map of Royal Riblet House and Complex**

1. House
2. Open Vista House
3. Lookout
4. Skating rink
5. Office
6. Swimming pool
7. Checkerboard
8. Gatehouse
9. Machine shed

