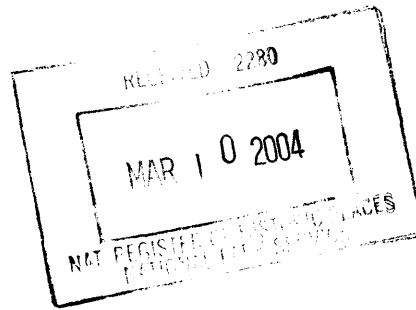


(Oct. 1990)

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service



# 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 *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an 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. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

## 1. Name of Property

historic name Hotel Californian

other names/site number The Californian

## 2. Location

street & number 851 Van Ness Avenue

not for publication

city or town Fresno

vicinity

state California

code CA

county Fresno

code 019

zip code 93721

## 3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this  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 for in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant

nationally  statewide  locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

K. M. Ellison  
Signature of certifying official/Title

3/9/04  
Date

California Office of Historic Preservation  
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria. ( See Continuation sheet for additional comments.)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of certifying official/Title

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal agency and bureau

## 4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

- entered in the National Register.
  - See continuation sheet.
- determined eligible for the National Register.
  - See continuation sheet.
- determined not eligible for the National Register.
- removed from the National Register.
- other, (explain:)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of the Keeper

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Action

Edson H. Beall

4/21/04

Hotel Californian  
Name of Property

Fresno, California  
County and State

**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

**Number of Resources within Property**  
(Do not include previously listed resources in count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	0	buildings
0	0	sites
0	0	structures
0	0	objects
1	0	Total

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

N/A

**Number of Contributing resources previously listed in the National Register**

0

**6. Function or Use**

**Historic Functions**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

DOMESTIC/hotel  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Current Functions**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

DOMESTIC/multiple dwelling  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**7. Description**

**Architectural Classification**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

Late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Revivals:  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Italian Renaissance  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Beaux Arts  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Materials**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation CONCRETE  
\_\_\_\_\_  
walls BRICK  
\_\_\_\_\_  
CONCRETE  
\_\_\_\_\_  
roof OTHER  
\_\_\_\_\_  
other \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Narrative Description**

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

Please see continuation sheets.

**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.)

Property is:

- 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 of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

**Areas of Significance**

(Enter categories from instructions)

ARCHITECTURE

**Period of Significance**

1923

**Significant Dates**

1923

**Significant Person**

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

**Cultural Affiliation**

**Architect/Builder**

H. Rafael Lake, Architect  
R. F. Felchlin & Company, Builders

**Narrative Statement of Significance**

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

**9. Major Bibliographical References**

**Bibliography**

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

**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 # \_\_\_\_\_

**Primary location of additional data:**

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State Agency
- Federal Agency
- Local Government
- University
- Other

Name of repository:

Hotel Californian  
Name of Property

Fresno, California  
County and State

## 10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property 150 square feet (0.67 acres)

### UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1	<u>11</u>	<u>511200</u>	<u>687350</u>	3	<u>          </u>	<u>          </u>	<u>          </u>
	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
2	<u>          </u>	<u>          </u>	<u>          </u>	4	<u>          </u>	<u>          </u>	<u>          </u>

See continuation sheet

### Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

### Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

## 11. Form Prepared By

name/title Christy Johnson McAvoy, Jennifer Minasian & Christopher Hetzel  
organization Historic Resources Group date 6/15/2003  
street & number 1728 Whitley Avenue telephone (323) 469-2349  
city or town Hollywood state CA zip code 90028

### Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

#### Continuation Sheets

#### Maps

A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

#### Photographs

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

#### Additional items

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items.)

### Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO.)

name Gary Squier, Preservation Hotel California, LP  
street & number 3129 Sixth Street telephone (310) 581-9043  
city or town Santa Monica state CA zip code 90405

**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 listing. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 *et seq.*)

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 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 Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P. O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20303.

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# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

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Hotel Californian  
Fresno, California

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## Section 7: Description

### *Summary*

The Hotel Californian, located at 851 Van Ness Avenue in Fresno, California's Fulton Mall district, is an outstanding example of a residential hotel developed in the California Central Valley during the boom years of the 1920s. Constructed in 1923 in the Italian Renaissance Revival style with Beaux Arts detailing, the nine-story structure originally served as a fashionable hostelry and housed various retail and commercial office spaces. The building currently provides housing for low-income seniors and many of the ground floor spaces have been converted for use as retail storefronts.

The hotel stands on a 150 foot square parcel of land at the intersection of Kern Street and Van Ness Avenue in downtown Fresno. The building has a northwest-southeast axis. Its ornamented northwest and northeast elevations directly front the sidewalks along Kern Street and Van Ness Avenue, respectively, and a service alley runs along the southwest elevation. The southeast elevation abuts the hotel's ground-level outdoor courtyard, which is on an adjacent lot.

A skeleton of reinforced concrete supports the Hotel Californian's entire structure. A variegated red brick facing with cast stone and painted metal ornamentation covers this framework on the primary facades, and painted stucco coats the rear and alley elevations. Vertical courses of wide cast stone quoins further embellish the primary facades at the building's corners.

The building's ground floor extends southeast approximately twenty feet beyond the massing of the upper floors and occupies the property's entire square parcel. The first two stories form a base for the third through eighth floors. The third through eighth floors are cut away to create a central court, which defines the building's U-shaped form that is open to the original primary facade on Kern Street. On the roof, there is an assemblage of small interior spaces atop the deepest section of the U shape. An Italian style loggia stands centered across the hotel's axis above the largest of these spaces. It consists of cast stone construction surmounted by a red tile roof and features classical arched openings with unadorned spandrels, Doric style columns, and cast stone balustrades. The entire hotel rests atop an excavated basement of the same width and length as the ground floor.

### *Exterior: Northeast Elevation (Van Ness Avenue)*

In adherence to the Italian Renaissance and Beaux-Arts design traditions popular in Fresno and other growing U.S. cities in the 1920s, the Hotel Californian's primary façades are visually divided into a two-story base, a shaft of five floors, and a capitol formed by the eighth floor and roof parapet. The design elements that separate these distinct portions of the façade are apparent on the Van Ness Avenue and Kern Street sides of the building.

Along Van Ness Avenue, the first floor is partitioned into a series of storefront bays and piers of white-painted cast stone formed to resemble massive ashlar blocks. Two of these piers align with the building's north and east corners, visually corresponding with the cast stone quoins that characterize the upper floors. The storefront bays, designed as

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Hotel Californian  
Fresno, California

part of a complete reconstruction of the hotel's ground level in the 1970s, each consist of a patchwork of fixed-pane aluminum framed glass. The recessed doors, panels above the doors, and large showcase windows—all made from these materials—are representative of the period of their installation and not compatible with the hotel's original design elements.

A course of cast stone, ornamented with a repeating coiled floriated pattern in low relief, separates the first and second stories. Above this, the dramatic fenestration of the second story evidences the nine-bay format of the northeast façade.

Each window on this level is set in an arched aperture capped with red brick voussoirs astride a white ancon keystone. The windows themselves have a tripartite design, each comprised of a large center segment set between two narrower segments. All three segments are double-hung with multiple panes and wooden sashes. The windows are framed in a Classical style, each exhibiting a molded wooden architrave, a paneled frieze, and a small cornice, atop which rests a simple half-patera of cast stone. Piers between the arched openings are clad in variegated red brick.

At the third story, the base of the building is crowned by an elaborate entablature resting neatly atop the ancones of the second story window arches. The lower portion of this feature is comprised of a cast cement frieze and architrave, the former ornamented with occasional rosettes and floriated designs. Above the frieze, a large denticulated cornice of white-painted galvanized iron creates a strong visual divide between the hotel's base and shaft.

The hotel's shaft consists of a basic grid of piers and spandrels of variegated red brick. All windows within the shaft and capitol are typical six-over-six vertical sliding metal sash windows, most set atop simple sills of slightly extruding cast stone and capped by a row of soldier coursed bricks loosely imitating voussoirs. The surrounds of those windows on the third and eight floors are differentiated from the others and help to visually "fasten" the shaft to the building's base and capitol.

The third floor windows are each framed by a white-painted cast stone architrave and topped by a cast stone cornice. Two scrolled consoles and a frieze panel, containing the same simple relief design evident in the half-paterae one level below, support each cornice.

The headers above the eighth floor windows each include the faux voussoir soldier course of brick, as well as a white-painted cast stone spandrel panel featuring a garland and rosette design. The lower window panes are partially concealed by simple balconettes, each consisting of a flat cast stone panel set behind an extruding iron railing. The balconettes rest atop a denticulated course of cast stone that spans the building's two principal facades. The course serves to visually separate the building's capitol from its shaft.

Crowning the structure's capitol is a prominent entablature composed of a simple cast stone frieze and a galvanized iron cornice. In typical Corinthian style, the cornice has richly formed modillions spaced by square coffers, as well as an egg-and-tongue molding supported by repeated consoles. Above the cornice, a cast stone parapet adorns the top of each bay with a roundel cast in a floriated design. Red clay tile of a typical Mediterranean appearance originally capped the parapet, matching the similar tile still visible on the loggia above. Galvanized metal sheeting has since replaced the tile in this location.

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Hotel Californian  
Fresno, California

## *Exterior: Northwest Elevation (Kern Street)*

The symmetry of the Hotel Californian's design is visible when viewing the building from Kern Street, the original primary facade, where the open portion of the "U" shape creates the impression of two parallel towers connected at the rear. Floors two through eight are shaped in this manner, while the facade of the ground and second stories occupies the full width of the lot. The portions of the two "towers" facing Kern Street are each three bays wide. They are nearly identical in exterior design to the building's facade along Van Ness Avenue, the chief exception being the dramatic cast stone surrounds of the windows occupying the middle bay of the eighth floor on each tower. Emphasis is placed on the windows by the extruding console-supported balconettes below, Corinthian columns on either side, and entablatures above supporting scrolled ornaments and a prominent central cartouche.

All nine bays of the facade's ground level are occupied by 1970s-era storefronts similar to those fronting Van Ness Avenue. The storefront in the centermost bay replaced the hotel's original grand canopied entrance. On the second floor, the three bays between the towers have also been modified from the building's original design. Aside from an elaborate cartouche centered above the hotel's original entrance, a tablet bearing the hotel's name, and a simple framing of cast stone, these bays were originally open to a "garden balcony" accessible from the interior second-floor ballroom. This balcony has since been covered and filled with residential units, leading to the insertion of non-original horizontal sliding windows in the outer two bays and the filling-in of the openings around the original central ornamentation in the middle bay. The original ornamentation remains intact, as do the shape and size of the openings, the cast stone piers separating each bay, and the cast stone balustrades.

Above the second story, where the building recedes to the deepest portion of the "U" shape, the exterior wall surfaces are defined by a basic grid of piers and spandrels of variegated red brick facing. The fenestration in this area is comprised of the same original six-over-six vertical sliding metal sash windows as characterizes the northeast elevation.

An enclosed freestanding penthouse centrally located on the roof gives the Kern Street facade the appearance of having a ninth story. This structure has cast stone walls and a number of small multiple-light windows, some of which have been replaced by fans or vents. Atop the structure stands the hotel's most recognizable feature – the arcaded Italian style loggia. The loggia was originally designed as a viewing platform. While almost entirely intact in its original form, the floor of the loggia has been perforated by ducts and vents for the building's climate systems. The loggia's balustrades match the balconettes at the second-story bays below.

## *Exterior: Southwest & Southeast Elevations (Alley and Courtyard Sides)*

The Hotel Californian's alley and courtyard facades have a sparse utilitarian design. Covered by a coating of stucco, the elevations' reinforced poured concrete walls are otherwise marked by a regular pattern of windows identical in type to those elsewhere on the building, but lacking in ornamentation. On the southwest (alley) elevation, the arch configuration present in the second floor bays of the primary facades is duplicated in the first six of nine bays in a much more simplified form. These arched windows evidence the fact that the architect did not ignore this portion of

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Hotel Californian  
Fresno, California

the building. Twin metal fire escapes descend the rear of the structure. A small boiler flue with a square cross section runs vertically along the building's southern corner to a vent at roof level.

## *Interior*

The interior of the Hotel Californian is currently used to house senior citizen residents of low income, along with the necessary management, staff, and other support services.

Oriented around the building's U-shaped plan, the building's upper floors retain an original double-loaded corridor room configuration, while a non-standard layout of both original and non-original spaces characterizes the first and second floors. In the decades since its construction, the building's first and second floors were modified in accordance with the evolution of its primary use and the changes in the perceived needs of the surrounding community. In contrast, the third through eighth floors have few alterations, as the former hotel rooms transitioned easily into use as residential units. Portions of the structure above the eighth floor also remain largely intact, but are no longer open to the public and are currently occupied by systems equipment.

The ground level has sustained far more modification over time than any other part of the building. These changes occurred primarily in the 1950s and again in 1973, when the main entrance was moved to the location of a former side entrance on the northeast façade, and the majority of the lobby, once extending nearly the full length of the building and two full stories in height in places, was filled in with a number of expanded retail spaces.

The current lobby occupies the rear-most portion of the original lobby. Original ceilings and white-painted pine moldings are intact in this space, as well as in the somewhat-modified corridor providing access from the street. Most other spaces on this level have dropped acoustical tile ceilings that obscure any original ornamentation that might remain. The lobby itself has carpet floor covering placed on top of the original marble flooring. When entering this space, non-original walls between columns on the right evidence where the lobby once continued outward to Kern Street. On the left, double French doors lead to a plain dining room that has a linoleum floor and retains no evidence of its original features and design.

The second floor has an O-shaped configuration that surrounds an empty space formerly occupied by the original cathedral glass atrium of the ground level lobby. The Kern Street side of this level, once an open landscaped balcony, has been filled in with residential units, as were spaces on the Van Ness Avenue side, which formerly contained meeting rooms and other public areas. At the rear, the original mezzanine is largely intact, with three short stairs of marble and iron leading up to a half-level where the management offices and a laundry room are located. Across from these, openings that once looked down into the original lobby below have been closed.

The ballroom, which occupies the floor's western portion, is the most significant feature of the second floor and perhaps the best-preserved interior space in the building. Elaborate moldings, cornices, ceiling medallions, and arched windows articulate the wood-floored space. Modifications include the installation of non-original mirrors over each pane of the exterior windows and the construction of a wall where doors once permitted access to the garden balcony above Kern Street.



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Fresno, California

The Hotel Californian's upper floors retain much of their original configuration and layout. The double-loaded corridors provide access to all of the residential units from a pair of electric elevators located in the building's southern corner. The corridors are characterized by original unit doors, door frames, transoms, and baseboards of painted white pine. Non-original handrails are present and dropped ceilings have been installed to conceal non-original ducting and wires.

The individual residential units retain essentially the same floor plans as the original hotel guestrooms, and the plan of rooms is the same on each of the upper floors. Units are singles (one room) or one-bedroom (two rooms), the latter replacing the hotel's original "luxury suites." Approximately thirty rooms occupy each floor, of which six are the larger one-bedroom type. All units have bathrooms and closets of varying size, and non-original kitchenettes have been installed in most of the units. Dropped ceilings, meant to accommodate new ductwork, were installed in portions of some units sometime in the 1970s. The dropped ceilings obscure intact original transoms and picture moldings wherever they are located. All exposed original ceilings have non-original textured acoustical or fireproof coating down to the level of the picture moldings. Most of the existing bathrooms have original hexagonal tile floors, tile baseboards, toilets, and bathtubs. The bathroom sinks appear to have been replaced in the 1950s.

*Integrity*

The Hotel Californian is a significant architectural landmark in the City of Fresno and is one of the best examples of Italian Renaissance Revival style architecture in the California Central Valley. The original exterior of the building is substantially intact and many of the exterior surfaces and finishes were repaired, cleaned, and repainted during a tax credit rehabilitation project, completed in 2003. On the interior, the building has sustained some alteration on the first and second floors, while the upper floors retain much of their original integrity. The following is a summary of the building's significant alterations prior to the 2003 rehabilitation.

*Alterations prior to the 2003 Rehabilitation:*

- Original clay tiles protecting the roof parapet were replaced with galvanized metal sheeting.
- New storefronts, consisting of aluminum-frame showcase windows and recessed doors, were installed within several existing openings on the first story of the northeast and northwest elevations. A few of the original storefront openings were enclosed with masonry. Remaining original elements include several cast stone piers and the size, number, and rhythm of the original storefront openings.
- The original canopied entrance in the center section of the northwest façade was replaced by an aluminum-framed storefront. The original ornamentation that existing above the entrance remains.
- The open-air garden balcony in the center of the northwest elevation on the second floor was enclosed and the space converted to additional residential units. At the northwest façade, the openings and decorative elements that defined the space remain intact. These elements include the shape and size of the openings, the cast stone piers separating each bay, and the cast stone balustrades.
- Several original small, multiple-light windows in the penthouse were replaced by fans and vents. The floor of the loggia atop the structure was also perforated by a number of ducts and vents for the building climate systems. The penthouse and loggia are otherwise in nearly original condition.
- The interior of the building's first and second floors were modified in accordance with the evolution and use of the building, with principal alterations occurring in the 1950s and 1970s. The original main

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Hotel Californian  
Fresno, California

entrance at the northwest elevation was moved to the location of the original side entrance at the northeast elevation, and the majority of the original lobby, which extended nearly the full length of the building, was partitioned into a number of large retail spaces. Original ceilings, white-painted pine moldings, and marble floors still remain in the current lobby, which occupies the rear-most portion of the original lobby. Other remnants of the original lobby may exist in the retail spaces, but are obscured by dropped acoustical tile ceilings.

- All original features have been removed from the existing first floor dining room.
- Original meeting rooms and public spaces on the Van Ness Avenue side of the building's second floor were converted to residential units. However, the original mezzanine at the rear of the level remains largely intact, including the ballroom, which is perhaps the best-preserved interior space in the building.
- The building's upper floors retain much of their original historic fabric. All of the bathroom sinks were replaced in the 1950s, and dropped ceilings were installed in some units in the 1970s to accommodate ductwork.

Despite these alterations, the Hotel California retains a high degree of physical integrity. Except for the storefronts on the first story, the building's original exterior remains essentially unchanged, and a high percentage of historic fabric remains in the interior, particularly in the upper floors. More importantly, the original condition of the building easily conveys its significance as one of the best examples of the Italian Renaissance Revival style in the region. The Hotel California retains its three part exterior organization and continues to exhibit the setting, size, massing, and detailed ornamentation that are representative of the Beaux Arts and Italian Renaissance Revival styles.

The tax credit rehabilitation in 2003 enhanced the Hotel Californian's historic significance and had little effect on its historic integrity. On the exterior, walls surfaces were cleaned, repaired, and repainted; deteriorated wood window frames were repaired as necessary; and severely damaged or missing doors were replaced with compatible replacements. All of these were relatively minor repairs that did little to change the building's outward appearance. Much of the rehabilitation work actually took place in the building's interior, and even this work had little effect on the building's character-defining features. Kitchenettes were installed in approximately half of the existing units, bathrooms were rehabilitated, and substantial upgrades were made to the building's mechanical, electrical, and plumbing systems. The entire project was certified by the National Park Service as having met the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation.

## *Conclusion*

The Hotel Californian is architecturally significant as one of the best examples of Italian Renaissance Revival style architecture in the California Central Valley. While the building has sustained some alteration, much of its original historic fabric remains intact. It remains a visually prominent landmark the City of Fresno and continues to have a central role in the local community.

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# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

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Hotel Californian  
Fresno, California

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## Section 8: Statement of Significance

### *Summary*

The Hotel Californian is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion C at the local level of significance. The building is recognized for its association with the economic prosperity and real estate development boom that affected Fresno and the Central Valley in the 1920s. Under Criterion C, it is one of the best examples of a hotel constructed in the Italian Renaissance Revival style in the region and is a signature work of prominent California architect, H. Rafael Lake.

The building was constructed in downtown Fresno in 1923 as a luxury hotel for city visitors and as a meeting place for city residents. Designed by H. Rafael Lake and constructed by R. F. Felchlin & Company, the building immediately became a symbolic landmark for the growing prosperity of the City of Fresno. In the ensuing years, the Hotel Californian gained a reputation as the best hotel between San Francisco and Los Angeles, and hosted a great number of famed individuals and important events. It remains emblematic of Fresno's prosperity in the 1920s and is an outstanding example of the type of development that occurred in California Central Valley cities wishing to promote a strong sense of their success and urbanization during this period.

### *Background*

The Italian Renaissance Revival style in which H. Rafael Lake fashioned the Hotel Californian is regarded by some historians as an unmistakable product of 1920's American culture, comparable in significance to the Model T Ford and the rise of Jazz. Driven by booming post-World War I economies, many cities experienced accelerated urban expansion and a profusion of new construction on a frequently unprecedented scale. For many of the more important commissions, architects repeatedly returned to Classical and Renaissance designs to express a sense of culture, opulence, and permanence that reflected a community's perception of its own success, as well as the outward appearance a client wished to convey. Such structures generated a sense of civic pride within communities, and helped cities command greater respect from outsiders.

The City of Fresno, California experienced this sense of "hectic prosperity" immediately following the First World War. As one of the largest cities in one of the most agriculturally rich valleys in the world, Fresno attracted masses of people and money as revenue from crops such as raisin grapes began to increase. As direct representation of this progress and a demonstration to the world of commerce that "Fresno had arrived," a new skyline of impressive buildings was constructed in the city's downtown district in a very short span of roughly five years. Working with notably similar classical revival designs, a small group of architects produced this multiple structure monument to Fresno's prosperity before declining grape prices and the 1929 stock market crash swept that prosperity away. Today, this skyline remains intact and has received comparatively little visual competition from modern construction projects. It so perfectly represents the development and cultural climate of the Central Valley in the 1920s that one architectural historian has claimed that nowhere in California but Fresno could such a distinct and completely coherent set of remarkable buildings remain visible today. The Hotel Californian's architects and builders contributed to this event, and the hotel itself was, and still is, a crucial part of the City of Fresno's unique skyline.

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Hotel Californian  
Fresno, California

Celebratory articles in Fresno newspapers at the time of the Hotel Californian's December 1923 opening spared no space nor words in touting the immense significance of the new building for the city and entire state. Constructed at a headline-garnering cost of \$1.25 million, funds for the project were drawn from both private coffers and public subscriptions. The spirit of this dichotomy carried over in the building's resulting use, with private guest accommodations given equal priority with spaces for public gatherings and enjoyment. The largest hotel in Fresno at the time and one of the 300 largest in the United States, the Hotel Californian's opening instantly increased the city's total number of guestrooms by twenty percent.

The hotel also had a reputation as being one of the city's most exclusive venues. Travertine marble, Caen stone, oak flooring, crystal fixtures, concealed central air conditioning, and a pipe organ on the mezzanine level all contributed to critics' claims of comparability with even the most luxurious hotels in the West. Many notable celebrities and dignitaries are known to have stayed at the Hotel Californian, including Joan Crawford and Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., who honeymooned at the Hotel Californian for a week, and Hollywood stars Clark Gable, Gary Cooper, Shirley Temple, and Clara Bow. John F. Kennedy, Herbert Hoover, and Nelson Rockefeller were also guests, and Eleanor Roosevelt campaigned for her husband there. These famous guests, as well as many others, benefited from the services of well-known Chef John Bernard, whom the hotel hired from France where he cooked for European royalty.

For over three decades, the Hotel Californian reigned as the largest, best-appointed, and only "three-star" hotel between San Francisco and Los Angeles.

## *Criterion C*

Much of the Hotel Californian's grandeur is evidenced in its distinctive Italian Renaissance Revival design. Embodying the typical characteristics of a 1920s high-rise hotel, the setting, size, and massing of the building are representative of this style, and it is comparable to other similar, noteworthy landmarks found in other cities.

The building stands alone now as it did in the 1920s, beside only sidewalks and far shorter buildings that tend to accentuate the domineering stature of the building's style. The Hotel Californian's nine floors, 130' height, comparatively large footprint, and detailed ornamentation are all characteristic of an architectural philosophy popular at the time. Often referred to as "Beaux Arts" because of its association with the Ecole des Beaux-Arts school in Paris, the use of classical revival traditions in 1920s buildings were architectural proclamations of self-awareness and, whether consciously or not, they evoked the success and grandeurs of Greek and Roman society. The Italian Renaissance Revival style, in particular, was a reinterpretation of these classical traditions, heavily influenced by the early Renaissance in Quattrocento Italy.

The Italian Renaissance Revival style emerged as a popular style in the United States in late 1880s and 1890s. In 1883, the architects McKim, Mead, and White first employed the style in the United States in their design for a large, imposing complex of stone town houses in New York City known as the Villard Houses. With these landmark buildings, the style became associated with prestigious American domestic buildings. Having originated in Florence and spread throughout central Italy, the style was later found to be well suited to the landscape and climate of California. As eclectic European revival styles gained in popularity, the Italian Renaissance Revival style was widely

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used for clubs, office buildings, apartment buildings, and public buildings throughout California through the early twentieth century. To many, associations with the Italian Renaissance signified an added sense of culture and refinement. This association was especially appealing to those who found success and prosperity during the heyday of the 1920s.

Like many of its contemporaries, the Hotel Californian was intended to stand out like a sentinel – massive, impermeable, and permanent – and yet with an elegant, highly cultured aesthetic. The building's distinctive "U" shape provided more surface area for windows and, therefore, permitted more light to enter interior spaces. Meanwhile, its arched openings, variegated red brick masonry, and finely detailed cast stone moldings are typical of the Italian Renaissance Revival style found in this building type. The Hotel Californian's most distinctive feature is the arcaded loggia located atop the building, roofed in red clay tile. The loggia design echoes the second floor exterior, where window surrounds created a similar arcaded appearance and balconettes match the typical Mediterranean balustrade beneath the loggia above.

The form of the Hotel Californian's ornamented façades adheres rigidly to Beaux Arts organizational principals. Just as a column is defined in Classical architecture as having three parts, so is the building divided into three distinct vertical segments: a two-floor base, a five-floor shaft, and a capitol comprised of the top floor and an entablature above. The dramatic ornamentation, fenestration, and use of white cast stone courses against variegated red brick create the obvious division between the three segments. The details within the ornamentation, including entablatures, columns and window surrounds all contain fundamental elements of the Corinthian order, exhibiting scrupulous adherence to common classical revival design practices within the Beaux-Arts school. The presence of elements specifically Roman in character also evidence the Italian roots of this design.

Many high-rise hotels constructed in the 1920s nationwide have a form and style similar to that of the Hotel Californian. Landmark California hotels constructed in this manner include San Francisco's St. Francis Hotel, San Diego's U. S. Grant Hotel, and Los Angeles' Biltmore Hotel, among several others.

The men responsible for designing and building the Hotel Californian were among the most respected architects in Fresno's history. They are credited with nearly every significant large building in Fresno as well as many elsewhere in California. H. Rafael Lake developed the design for the hotel in association with R. F. Felchlin Company, architects, engineers, and builders.

The Hotel Californian was Lake's first independent commission. He designed several other landmark Fresno buildings while working under the auspices of local firms, including the Trewhitt-Shields Company and the firm Allied Architects. Educated at the University of California and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Lake later served a five-year apprenticeship under Cass Gilbert, one of the United States' leading Beaux-Arts architects. Lake is credited with the designs for the Memorial Auditorium (1936; listed in the National Register), County Hall of Records (1935), Wesley Super Garage (1931) and Blue Cross Veterinary Hospital (1936), all in Fresno. Later in his career, Lake partnered with two colleagues to form the firm Fisher, Lake and Traver, designers of the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel (1927; listed in the National Register) in Los Angeles and other notable structures.

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R. F. Felchlin Company produced the majority of Fresno's Beaux Arts skyline, including the Bank of Italy (1917; listed in the National Register), Pacific Southwest Building (1923; tallest building between San Francisco and Los Angeles), San Joaquin Light & Power Company Building (1923) and Radin-Kamp Department Store (1924).

## *Conclusion*

The Hotel Californian continues to stand as a physical manifestation of the growth and prosperity of the City of Fresno during the early 1920s. It is an outstanding example of the type of development that occurred during this period in the California Central Valley, and represents the pride and promotional efforts of the community at that time. An imposing building in the city's downtown district to this day, the Hotel Californian is also one of the community's most important architectural landmarks. The Hotel Californian is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion C at the local level of significance as one of the best examples of an Italian Renaissance Revival style hotel in the region, as well as being a signature work of prominent California architect, H. Rafael Lake.

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## Section 10: Geographical Data

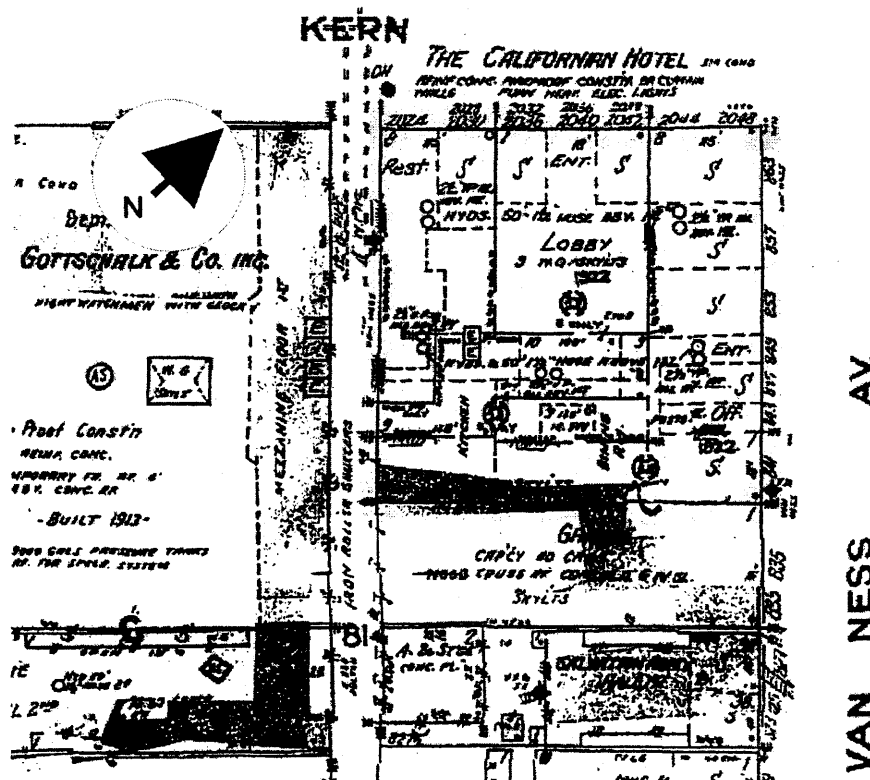
### Verbal Boundary Description

The building stands on a 150 foot square parcel of land at the intersection of Kern Street and Van Ness Avenue in downtown Fresno, California. The property is bound by Kern Street on the northwest and by Van Ness Avenue on the northeast. A service alley defines the property's southwest boundary, while a ground-level outdoor courtyard bounds the property on the southeast.

### Verbal Boundary Justification

These are the historic and current boundaries of the property.

### Sketch Map





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## Additional Documentation: Photographs

Name: Hotel Californian

Location: 851 Van Ness Avenue  
City of Fresno  
Fresno County, California

Photographer: Carly Johnson

Date of Photographs: March 2003

Location of Negatives: Historic Resources Group  
1728 Whitley Avenue  
Los Angeles CA 90028

1. Northwest and northeast facades, view south
2. Detail of east section of the northwest facade, view southeast
3. Detail of central section of the northwest facade, view southeast
4. Detail of the west section of the northwest facade, view southeast
5. Detail of the first story of the northeast façade, view northwest
6. Northwest façade, view east
7. Southeast elevation, view north
8. Southeast and northeast elevations, view west
9. Northeast façade, view west
10. Northeast façade, view southwest
11. Northwest and southwest elevation of the rooftop loggia, view east
12. Detail of the rooftop loggia
13. Main entrance corridor (former side entrance), view northeast

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14. Main Lobby on the first floor, view northeast
  15. Main Lobby on the first floor, view southwest
  16. Dining room on the first floor, view east
  17. Second floor lobby, view southwest
  18. Second floor ballroom, view southeast
  19. Detail of arched opening at second floor ballroom, view southwest
  20. Detail of chandelier at second floor ballroom
  21. Typical upper floor elevator lobby, view northwest
  22. Typical upper floor corridor
  23. Typical upper floor unit
  24. Typical upper floor staircase