

PH0690490

DATA SHEET

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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

FOR NPS USE ONLY	
RECEIVED	APR 21 1977
DATE ENTERED	MAY 27 1977



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

1 NAME

HISTORIC Providence - Biltmore Hotel

AND/OR COMMON

2 LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER 11 Dorrance Street

__NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CITY, TOWN Providence

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

__ VICINITY OF No. 2 - Rep. Edward Beard

STATE Rhode Island

CODE 44

COUNTY Providence

CODE 007

3 CLASSIFICATION

CATEGORY	OWNERSHIP	STATUS	PRESENT USE	
<input type="checkbox"/> DISTRICT	<input type="checkbox"/> PUBLIC	<input type="checkbox"/> OCCUPIED	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSEUM
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BUILDING(S)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE	<input type="checkbox"/> UNOCCUPIED	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCIAL	<input type="checkbox"/> PARK
<input type="checkbox"/> STRUCTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> BOTH	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> WORK IN PROGRESS	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATIONAL	<input type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE RESIDENCE
<input type="checkbox"/> SITE	PUBLIC ACQUISITION	ACCESSIBLE	<input type="checkbox"/> ENTERTAINMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> RELIGIOUS
<input type="checkbox"/> OBJECT	<input type="checkbox"/> IN PROCESS	<input type="checkbox"/> YES: RESTRICTED	<input type="checkbox"/> GOVERNMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENTIFIC
	<input type="checkbox"/> BEING CONSIDERED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> YES: UNRESTRICTED	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRIAL	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
		<input type="checkbox"/> NO	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> OTHER: hotel

4 OWNER OF PROPERTY

NAME Biltmore Hotel Associates

STREET & NUMBER 11 Dorrance Street

CITY, TOWN Providence

__ VICINITY OF

STATE Rhode Island

5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE, REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC. Providence City Hall

STREET & NUMBER 25 Dorrance Street

CITY, TOWN Providence

STATE

Rhode Island

6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE INTERFACE PROVIDENCE

DATE 1975

__FEDERAL __STATE __COUNTY LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR SURVEY RECORDS Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission

CITY, TOWN Providence

STATE

Rhode Island

7 DESCRIPTION

CONDITION		CHECK ONE	CHECK ONE
<input type="checkbox"/> EXCELLENT	<input type="checkbox"/> DETERIORATED	<input type="checkbox"/> UNALTERED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ORIGINAL SITE
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> RUINS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ALTERED	<input type="checkbox"/> MOVED DATE _____
<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> UNEXPOSED		

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The Biltmore Hotel, completed in 1922, is a key visual landmark in downtown Providence. Occupying a triangular block bounded by Dorrance, Washington, and Eddy Streets, the hotel is located at the western end of Kennedy Plaza and faces Burnside Park, a major green space in downtown Providence. The building is adjacent to Union Station and the central business district.

The brick structure is composed of two distinct building blocks. The first three stories of the building, containing stores and public rooms, occupy the full site, and the main entrance façade fills the length of the hypotenuse of the triangle along Dorrance Street. The lodging rooms, which begin at the fourth floor, are contained in an L-shaped tower which rises nineteen stories along the Washington and Eddy Street sides of the site; the front of the Washington Street wing -- i.e., facing Dorrance Street -- is slightly bowed its entire height. The roofs of both the three-story block and the tower are flat, with protective parapets around the perimeter. A small service structure is on the roof of the tower in the corner of the L.

In accordance with newly implemented fire codes, the Biltmore was built entirely of fireproof materials. The steel-frame structure is sheathed in Harvard brick, with fireproof plaster walls inside, and metal doors and window sashes; decorative trim is of fireproof molded plaster inside and stone outside.

The style of the building, publicized at the time as having the "spirit of the 'Greek Revival,'"¹ can be more accurately described as rather dry Beaux-Arts Neo-Federal. The greatest part of the building, both exterior and interior, is unadorned, but classically derived detailing is used within and without to emphasize public and ceremonial spaces.

Exterior articulation is dependent upon the tripartite base-column-capital format so common in early skyscrapers.² This format is reinforced by the wall adornment, which is limited to the three lower and two upper stories and, further, identifies the public rooms from the exterior. The format of the entrance façade on Dorrance Street derived from the Italian baroque palazzo, with its basement first story and piano nobile above. The first floor provides

¹"Providence Biltmore Hotel, Providence, R.I.," Architecture and Building, Vol. 58 (July 1922): 58.

²Montgomery Schuyler, "The Skyscraper Up-to-Date," cited in Winston Weisman, "A New View of Skyscraper History," The Rise of American Architecture, ed. by Edgar Kaufman, Jr. (New York: Praeger Publishers, in association with the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1970), p. 115.

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access to the building and space for shops, and its unadorned wall surface is broken only by entrances and shop windows. The second and third floors, containing the lobby, restaurants, and offices, are screened by an arcade of pairs of massive engaged Corinthian columns; between each of these pairs is a two-story, round-headed window. While the arcading fills only the Dorrance Street elevation, the definition of the piano nobile is carried around the circumference of the building through a continuation of the massive entablature in a wide stringcourse above the third story and the use of stone surrounds on the second-story windows. This articulation of the façade not only emphasizes the functional importance of this part of the building, but further provides a visual link with other buildings in Kennedy Plaza which rely in varying degrees on the same palazzo format, notably the Providence City Hall, just across Washington Street to the south, and the Federal Building, at the east end of Kennedy Plaza.

The third through sixteenth floors are sheathed in brick, and the wall surface is punctuated only by the regular rows of steel-sash, one-over-one windows -- which replace the original casement windows -- and the low-relief brick quoining at the corners of the building.

The top two floors, the location of the ballroom and small function rooms, are set off from the simple brick walls on the lower stories of the tower by a stone stringcourse with Greek fretwork just above the sixteenth floor. Regularly-spaced two-story round-headed windows, separated by thin Ionic pilasters, rise above the stringcourse, again providing both definition of the public rooms within and a visual stop for the shaft of the tower.

Public interior spaces are fairly richly detailed. The entrance in the center of the Dorrance Street facade opens onto the marble main entrance staircase which rises in two stages to the center of the lobby on the second floor. The two-story lobby is enclosed on three sides by a gallery opening onto the third-floor level. Architectural detailing in the lobby derives freely from Adamesque decorative schemes: the very flat treatment of the Ionic order in the piers for the gallery and the pilasters on the walls defines the perimeter of the room; the fan-vaulted ceiling is covered with elaborate geometric coffering. This centrally-located lobby provides access to other public rooms, offices, and elevators to the upper floors.

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The main dining room, in the southeast corner of the building, is decorated with a free mixture of mid- and late Georgian motifs including striated Composite piers, Serlian door motifs, and broken-scroll pediments. Just outside the entrance to the main dining room is a handsome octagonal Adamesque ante-room with a delicately scaled mantelpiece, and niches in four of the walls.

The intermediate lodging floors are quite simple, with no architectural distinction; the decorative schemes of these floors change subject to the vagaries of interior decorators.

The seventeenth-floor ballroom, in the southern wing of the tower, is a large rectangular space with bowed ends. The architectural scheme is developed around an arcaded effect, created by the interpolation of paired Ionic pilasters in the spaces between the round-headed windows. These pilasters support an elaborate fictile frieze which circumscribes the room. Elaborate Adamesque stucco-work groteschi fill the spandrels between the arches of the windows, above which is an elaborate cornice. The flat coffered ceiling of the ballroom is a simpler geometric pattern than that of the lobby.

Other public rooms on the seventeenth floor are not given this elaborate architectural treatment, and, like the lodging floors, have been redecorated several times in the hotel's history.

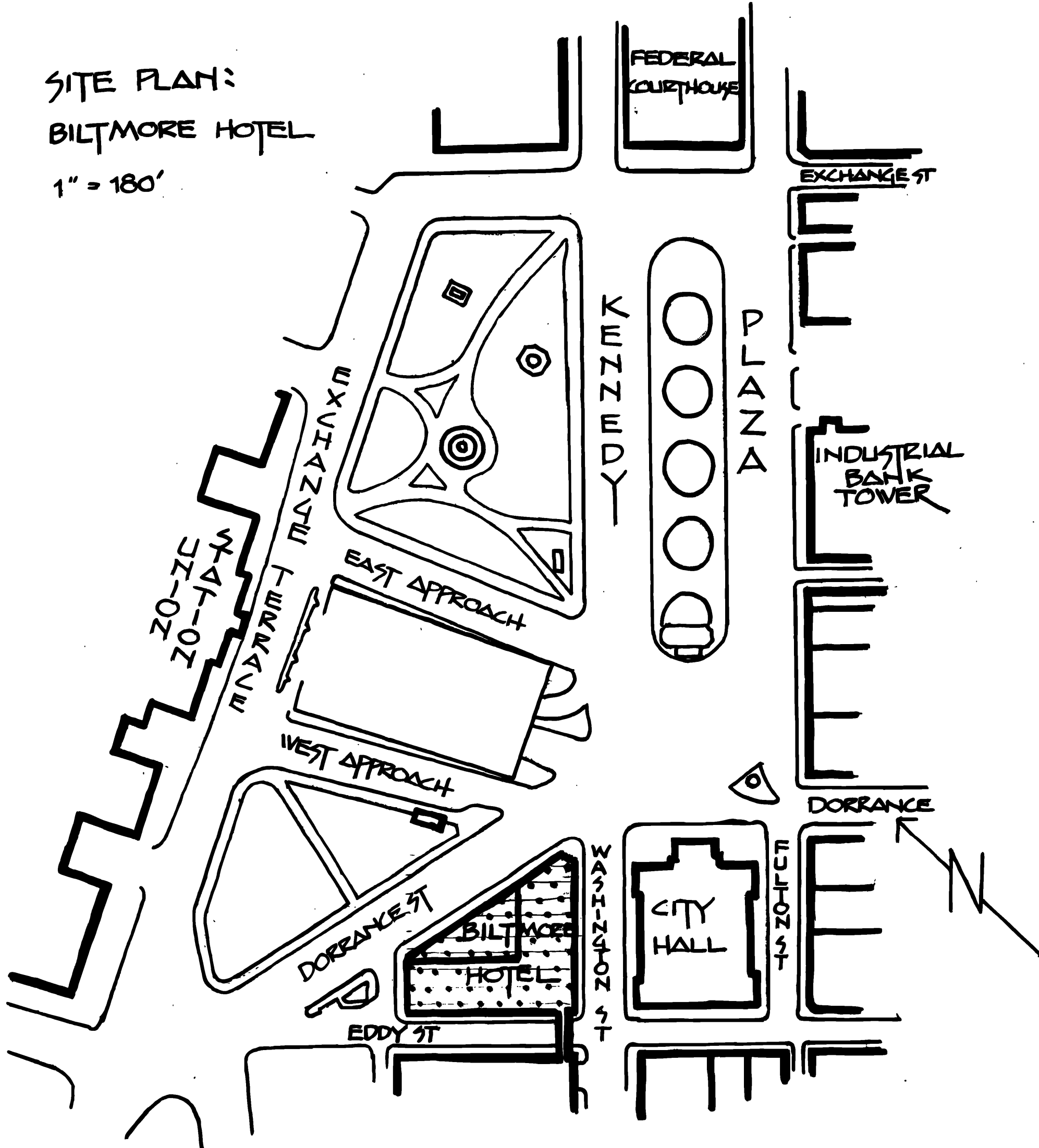
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SITE PLAN:
BILTMORE HOTEL
1" = 180'



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 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 checked="" 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 checked="" 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 type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRY	<input type="checkbox"/> POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY)	
		<input type="checkbox"/> INVENTION			

SPECIFIC DATES 1920-1922; 1977

BUILDER/ARCHITECT Warren and Wetmore; Shepley, Bulfinch, Richardson and Abbot

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Biltmore Hotel was built in the early 1920's as a result of the initiative taken by Providence businessmen under the auspices of the Chamber of Commerce. Throughout its history it has served as a converging point for the plexus of Rhode Island commercial, industrial, and social interests. Its importance to the twentieth-century history of commerce, architecture, and social attitudes, especially in the context of downtown Providence, is crucial.

Following the turn of the twentieth century, the first-class hotel began to emerge as a symbol of the progressive civic spirit. As early as 1907, Henry James speculated on

the possibilities of the hotel -- for which the American spirit has found so unprecedented a use and a value; leading it on to express so a social, indeed positively an aesthetic ideal, and making it so, at this supreme pitch, a synonym for civilization, for the capture of conceived manners themselves, that one is verily tempted to ask if the hotel-spirit may not just be the American spirit most seeking and most finding itself.³

While James' musings were inspired by giant New York hotels -- the recently completed Waldorf-Astoria in particular -- by the second decade of this century the possession of a first class facility became crucial to local boosters in smaller cities across the country: "Of course every town in the country with a sense of decency has a new hotel in these days. The minute you arrive, the native who meets you begins booming the hotel to the skies."⁴

³Henry James, "New York Revisited," The American Scene (New York: Harper Brothers, 1907), p. 99.

⁴Cole Porter, The New Hotel in America, Speech delivered at Scroll and Key, Yale University, 16th January 1913, cited in Brendan Gill, Cole, ed. by Robert Kimball (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), p. 21.

9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Perspective of the Proposed Providence Biltmore Hotel. Providence Biltmore Hotel Company, 1920.

Cady, John Hutchins. The Civic and Architectural Development of Providence, 1636-1950. Providence: The Book Shop, 1957.

See continuation sheet 7

10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY less than 1 acre

UTM REFERENCES

A	1,9	2,99,56,0	4,63,21,87,0	B			
	ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING		ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING
C				D			

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

See first paragraph of Description, Section 7

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

STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE

11 FORM PREPARED BY

NAME / TITLE

Wm McKenzie Woodward

ORGANIZATION

Rhode Island Historic Preservation Commission

DATE

March 1977

STREET & NUMBER

150 Benefit Street

TELEPHONE

401-277-2678

CITY OR TOWN

Providence

STATE

Rhode Island

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.

FEDERAL REPRESENTATIVE SIGNATURE

Fredrick C. Williamson

TITLE

State Historic Preservation Officer

DATE

April 13, 1977

FOR NPS USE ONLY

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

DATE

5/29/95

DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF ARCHEOLOGY AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION

ATTEST:

DATE

5.17.77

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

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With the great promotion of Providence as a manufacturing, commercial, and shipping center in the early years of the twentieth century, the need for a first-class hotel in the heart of the city became critical. While a number of hotels existed downtown, including the 250-room Narragansett Hotel (1878, William R. Walker, architect, now destroyed), none could provide the modern and efficient service of new hotels in New York, Boston, or even New Haven. The need for a new hotel was under discussion by 1915, but the intervention of World War I halted any action. In mid-1918, the Chamber of Commerce again took up the issue. A committee was formed to define specific needs, negotiations for the site were begun, and by January 1920 an agreement was reached between the Chamber of Commerce and a hotel management firm headed by John McE. Bowman and L.D. Wallick, noted New York entrepreneurs.

To raise money for the construction of the Biltmore, a committee headed by Arthur L. Aldred solicited the Providence business community for subscriptions of preferred stock, and by May 1920 approximately \$2.5 million had been pledged for the new hotel. The balance of the approximately \$5 million needed for completion of the hotel was obtained by mortgage and the sale of common stock. The expenses of fund drive and other incidentals were met by the Chamber of Commerce.

The feat of organizing the campaign and raising the money for the Biltmore by the Chamber of Commerce was hailed as "the greatest single achievement of Chambers of Commerce in the United States" at the Annual Meeting of the National Organization of Chamber of Commerce Secretaries in October 1920.⁵ Never before had a project of such magnitude been successfully attempted by a Chamber of Commerce. The rapid success of the campaign reflected not only the concern of the Providence business community for adequate local facilities, but further emphasized the flourishing state of commerce in the area.

The building erected by the Providence Biltmore Corporation was by far the most modern structure in Providence. Not only was it the tallest building in Providence -- until 1928 when the Industrial Bank Tower was constructed on Kennedy Plaze -- but also its facilities and technical improvements were a great advancement over earlier Providence hotel norms.

⁵"Providence Biltmore a Chamber of Commerce Achievement," Providence Magazine, Vol. 34, No 6 (June 1922): 289.

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The modernity of the building was largely due to the selection of the architectural firm Warren and Wetmore of New York. While Providence architectural patronage usually supported local architects, the New York firm was no doubt chosen because of its expertise in the field of hotel construction: to their credit by 1919 were New York's Grand Central Station, and the Commodore, Biltmore, and Pennsylvania Hotels, the latter so zealously admired by Sinclair Lewis's George F. Babbitt.⁶ Warren and Wetmore provided the hotel with a large, modern, efficient kitchen on the second floor; the elevator bank at the center of the L-shaped tower, removed from immediate adjacency to the lodging rooms; a bath to each room; an up-to-date mechanical system in the basement; and fireproof construction.

As the second skyscraper in Providence -- the first being the Turk's Head of 1913 -- the Biltmore retains something of the scale of the downtown's smaller nineteenth-century buildings in its three-story base, but its plain sixteen-story tower heralds the simpler towers that would be built in the area later in this century, such as the Hospital Trust Tower and the Old Stone Bank Tower, both from the early 1970's.

Following its opening in June 1922, attended by 1200 persons representing business, industry, government, and society, the Biltmore quickly became the gathering place of each of these elements in the Rhode Island populace. During the week following its opening, for example, the Biltmore's facilities were booked for occasions as diverse as a dance and buffet supper by the Aero Club of Rhode Island, a Block-Aid Ball for Rhode Island Hospital, a New England Warehousemen's luncheon, a Brown University Cammarian Club dinner, and Mrs. A. Gorman's whist and shower party.

The Biltmore continued to be a site of numerous testimonial dinners, conventions, and parties. A testimonial dinner recorded on film was held for Edward M. Fay, the dean of Rhode Island showmen, in 1947. New York Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia was honored by the Rotary Club in 1939 at the Biltmore. And until its demise in 1969, the Debutante Assembly Hall presented young women to Providence society each December in the Biltmore ballroom.

⁶Sinclair Lewis, Babbitt, Signet Classic (New York: New American Library, n.d.), p. 122.

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During the 1920's the Biltmore achieved some national attention when L. D. Wallick, manager of the hotel, successfully operated a vegetable garden and poultry farm on the roof of the hotel's tower. Begun as a hobby, the venture flourished, and the hotel was soon able to provide its guests with fresh eggs, chickens, ducks, and vegetables in season. A large cutting garden provided fresh flowers for the public and guest rooms. Plans for a small dairy herd never materialized. The roof garden was not without its problems, however, such as the occasional escape of violently flapping chickens over the parapet into Washington Street traffic and the 1927 exodus of the entire flock of ducks to Narragansett Bay. Despite these problems, the roof garden flourished well into the 1930's.

In 1947, the Biltmore was purchased by the Sheraton hotel chain, which continued to operate the hotel through the early 1970's.

During the late 1960's, the hotel fell on hard times. Declining use of the railroad; decentralization of business, retail, and industrial activities; and the same quest for modernity that brought the Biltmore into being in the 1920's militated against the continuing success of the Biltmore, and the hotel finally closed in January 1975.

By 1976, however, interest in downtown Providence focused on the revitalization of the area as a whole, spurred on by publications such as Interface: Providence, activities in the Mayor's Office of Community Development, programs by the Providence Preservation Society, and the interest of business groups with financial stakes in the continuing use of the downtown. While extensive projects are in the planning stages, the first steps toward the revitalization of the downtown are the renovations of Union Station and the Biltmore.

The Biltmore was purchased in September 1976 by Biltmore Hotel Associates, a limited partnership, the general partners of which are wholly-owned subsidiaries of Textron, Incorporated; The Outlet Company; Providence Journal Company; and the Business Development Company. The hotel management firm, Hotels of Distinction, Incorporated, has been retained by the consortium to renovate the hotel, which is scheduled to re-open in the spring of 1978. The Boston architectural firm Shepley, Bulfinch, Richardson and Abbot and the Providence firm, Morris Nathanson Design plan to refurbish the

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hotel in a manner sympathetic to the architectural character of the building. The elaborate interior detailing will be maintained, and structural changes will be limited to the installation of a glass-front elevator at the inside corner of the tower and the removal of the main entrance staircase, which will be obviated with the transfer of the entrance lobby and registration desk from the second floor to ground level.

The importance of the Biltmore, both historically and currently, to commerce, architecture, and social history makes its entry on the National Register crucial at this time. Today, as in 1922, the key to a prosperous downtown is the continuing success of those enterprises located there. Recognition of the Biltmore by the National Register would not only emphasize the historical role of the hotel in the downtown, but further encourage similar preservation projects to insure the continuing prosperity of downtown Providence.

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MAGAZINE & NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

- "Some of the Hotels of Providence" Board of Trade Journal Volume 24,
Number 2 (February 1912), pp. 53-60.
- "Our New \$3,000,000 Hotel is Assured." Providence Magazine Volume 31,
Number 11 (November 1919), pp. 529-532.
- "Negotiations for Hotel Completed." Providence Journal, (6th
November 1919) pgs. 1,5.
- "Purchase of Hotel Site is Arranged." Providence Journal (15th
November 1919), p. 1.
- "New Hotel's Cost About \$3,500,000." Providence Journal (4th
December 1919), p. 3
- "New Providence Hotel Negotiations are Completed." Providence
Magazine Volume 32, Number 1 (January 1920), p. 8.
- "Agreement signed for Building of Providence Biltmore Hotel."
Providence Magazine Volume 32, Number 2 (February 1920), p. 56.
- "Agreement signed for Building of Providence Biltmore Hotel."
Providence Journal, (14th February 1920), p. 3.
- "Promoters of Providence Biltmore Hotel May Sign Agreement To-day"
Providence Journal, (12th February 1920), p. 2
- "Providence-Biltmore Hotel Proposition Splendidly Supported."
Providence Magazine Volume 32, Number 3 (March 1920), p. 109.
- "Shall the Providence-Biltmore Hotel Be Built?" Providence
Magazine Volume 32, Number 4 (April 1920), p. 170.
- "How Providence Went Over the Top With its Hotel Project."
Providence Magazine Volume 32 Number 5 (May 1920), p. 222.
- "Hotel Biltmore Success Noted." Providence Journal, (14th May 1920),
p. 3.

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- "The Providence-Biltmore Hotel." Providence Magazine Volume 33, Number 2 (February 1921), p. 83.
- "Providence-Biltmore Hotel." Providence Magazine Volume 33, Number 10 (October 1921), p. 495.
- "Providence Biltmore Hotel Opens June 1" Providence Magazine Volume 34, Number 4 (April 1922), p. 211.
- "Providence Biltmore a Chamber of Commerce Achievement" Providence Magazine Volume 34, Number 6 (June 1922), p. 289.
- "Providence Biltmore Complete in Every Detail" Providence Magazine Volume 34, Number 6 (June 1922), p. 292.
- "Biltmore Ready for Opening." Providence Sunday Journal, (4th June 1922), Section 6, p. 1.
- "Biltmore Hotel to Have Formal Opening To-night." Providence Journal Volume 94, Number 134 (6th June 1922), pgs. 1, 5.
- Opening of Providence Biltmore Marks New Epoch in City's History." Providence Journal Volume 94, Number 135 (7th June 1922), pgs. 1, 4.
- "Providence-Biltmore Hotel, Providence, R.I." Architecture and Building Volume 58 (July 1922) pp. 58-69.
- "Wallick Has a Truck Farm on Top of a Hotel." American Magazine, Volume 54, Number 2 (February 1928), pp. 63-64.
- "Sheraton Buys Controlling Interest in Biltmore" Providence Journal, (5th January 1947), pgs. 2, 13.
- "Biltmore Hotel Moves Ahead With Renovation Plans." Lodging and Food-Service News (22nd January 1977), p. 9.

FILMS

- "Why Providence." Film sponsored by Providence Town Cryers. Directed by Harry C. Burnham. Coronet Films, ca. 1925.
- "Edward M. Fay Testimonial Dinner." Film. Providence: 21st April 1947.