

9. Major Bibliographical References

See attached list

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of nominated property less than one acre

Quadrangle name West Washington

Quadrangle scale 1:24,000

UTM References

A

1	8	3	2	4	2	8	0	4	3	0	7	0	4	0
Zone		Easting				Northing								

B

Zone		Easting				Northing								

C

Zone		Easting				Northing								

D

Zone		Easting				Northing								

E

Zone		Easting				Northing								

F

Zone		Easting				Northing								

G

Zone		Easting				Northing								

H

Zone		Easting				Northing								

Verbal boundary description and justification

North side of F Street between 13th and 14th Streets, Square 253, lot 806

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

state code county code

state code county code

11. Form Prepared By

name/title

organization Traceries

date April 6, 1983

street & number 1606 20th Street, N.W.

telephone 202-462-0333

city or town Washington, D.C.

state

12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

national state local

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

State Historic Preservation Officer signature

Carol B. Thompson

title

date 11/19/84

For NPS use only

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

Patrick W. Andrews

date 3/27/85

Keeper of the National Register

Attest:

date

Chief of Registration

8. Significance

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

Specific dates 1885-1887 **Builder/Architect** John J. Howlett/Alfred B. Mullett

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

The Sun Building is proposed for listing on the National Register of Historic Places by reason of its strong national and local architectural significance. The District of Columbia Historic Preservation Review Board, having held a hearing on December 13, 1983, has determined that the Sun Building should be placed on the National Register of Historic Places for the following reasons:

- 1) It is a distinctive surviving example of the private practice work of Alfred Bult Mullett who, as Supervising Architect of the Treasury from 1866 to 1874, had a major impact on post Civil War public architecture in the United States.
- 2) An early Washington example of a new building type, the tall elevator office building or "skyscraper," it incorporates a rare surviving example of an historically significant transitional structural framework.
- 3) Designed to represent the corporate image of a major American newspaper in the Nation's Capital, it is significant in the history of this country's news industry.

The Sun Building has qualified as a Category II Landmark in the Nation's Capital. It has been deemed to have value which contributes to the cultural heritage and visual beauty and interest of the District of Columbia and its environs for the following reasons:

- 1) The Sun Building is the work of Alfred Bult Mullett who, holding the prestigious and extremely influential position of Supervising Architect of the U.S. Treasury (1866-1874) during the tumultuous reconstruction era, played a major creative architectural role in the development of the city of Washington. His surviving work here includes the Executive Office Building (Old State, War and Navy Building), a Category I Landmark of the National Capital listed individually in the National Register of Historic Places and included in the Lafayette Park Historic District and the Apex Building, a Category III Landmark included in the Pennsylvania Avenue National Historic Site and a focal point in the plan developed by the PADC for the revitalization of Pennsylvania Avenue.

7. Description

Condition		Check one	Check one
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> deteriorated	<input type="checkbox"/> unaltered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> original site
<input 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		

*see attached list of alterations at end of this section

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

SUN BUILDING DESCRIPTION

The Sun Building was designed in 1885-87 by the nationally recognized architect Alfred Bult Mullett for A.S. Abell, publisher of the Baltimore Sun, as the paper's Washington news bureau. The building was constructed by John H. Howlett. A contemporary account stated that "'The Sun Building' marks, it is believed, a new era in building in Washington." ¹ This new era was characterized by rapidly developing technologies. At the time of its construction, the Sun Building was viewed as one of Washington's most distinguished new business structures.

In 1887, the date of the structure's completion, the Evening Star stated:

...it is the most expensive private building ever erected in Washington. Its huge and elegant front would make it a conspicuous object among the splendid business structures on Broadway, New York... ²

The building stands as a fine example of the Victorian Gothic style of architecture. But its architectural significance lies beyond that of a skilled rendition of style. This building is an early embodiment of today's well-used concept of architectural corporate image. Rich materials, large scale, and generous size present a substantial structure. The use of exuberant shapes, careful attention to decorative features (especially texture), and elegant proportions attest to the full articulation of the design. The height, structural system, and elevators clearly establish the innovative thinking inherent in the building. Repeated use of the decorative sun and sunflower (on both the interior and exterior) is the signature of the Baltimore Sun Publishing Company. The building reinforced the Baltimore Sun as a newspaper force in the city of Washington. The visual presence of the building marked what was to be the consummation of the Sun's eminence as the leading paper in the Nation's Capital.

The Sun Building is a nine-story office building (53'w x 114'd x 116'h) constructed with an iron, wrought iron and steel skeleton, and masonry exterior and cross walls, in the Victorian Gothic Style.

Although the style of construction is massive, as

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

For NPS use only

National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form

received DEC 6 1984
date entered MAR 27 1985

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

1. Name

historic The Sun Building (American Bank Building)

and/or common Same

2. Location

street & number 1317 F Street, N.W. not for publication

city, town Washington, D.C. vicinity of NA

state code county code

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use	
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input type="checkbox"/> public	<input checked="" 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 checked="" type="checkbox"/> commercial	<input type="checkbox"/> park
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input 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"/> n/a in process	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government	<input type="checkbox"/> scientific
	<input type="checkbox"/> n/a being considered	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
		<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> other:

4. Owner of Property

name The Sun Building Associates

street & number 1317 F Street, N.W.

city, town Washington, D.C. vicinity of state

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Recorder of Deeds

street & number 5th and D Street, N.W.

city, town Washington, D.C. state

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title has this property been determined eligible? yes no

date federal state county local

depository for survey records

city, town state

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

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

For NPS use only

received 12/6/84

date entered

Continuation sheet

Item number 7

Page 2 of 7

required by the great size of the building, yet the introduction of graceful lines and the blending of the smooth-faced marble with massive rock-faced blocks imparts an element of lightness which is pleasing to the eye.³

The facade is particularly successful due to the three graceful archways at street level. This feature diminishes bulk, while emphasizing the verticality of this early tall building. The F Street facade is dressed by rusticated marble ashlar block facing. It is organized into three vertical bays that are horizontally subdivided by an enriched entablature between the second and third, and eighth and ninth stories. Two splay-sided oriels rise from the third to eighth levels in the outer two bays and terminate in gabled dormers.

The 1887 Star article gave a detailed description of the building's facade:

The feature of the front is the arch on each side of the main entrance, which is the center of the building. These arches spring from the floor level of the second story, which is treated architecturally as an entresol and extends to its ceiling. From the keystones of these arches, which are decorated with colossal lions' heads carved in the marble, spring oriel windows, which run through the stories, and terminate in the main cornice of solid marble. Over the main entrance is a carved balcony, which is supported by boldly carved consoles that cut through and combine with the capitals of the first-story piers. In the center of the arch over the balcony is the carved head of a Satyr. An ornamental cornice crowns the second story, and in the main cornice a similar style of ornamentation is continued, the sunflower and foliage being wrought out in the stone very effectively. There are moulded belt courses in each story, which also serve as lintels and sills. Above the main cornice is an enriched balustrade course, twin windows, with gabled heads, terminated by carved finials, with rosettes in the gables.⁴

The center bay, which originally extended into a steeple (demolished in 1950), now terminates in a square projecting bay with a Syrian arch which bears the engraved legend, "The Sun Building." A sunburst motif fills this round arch. A balustrade

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

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

For NPS use only

received 12/6/84

date entered

Continuation sheet

Item number 7

Page 3 of 7

connects the central projection with its flanking gabled dormers. The roof features slate mansard sides and a convex copper-clad dome at the rear (added in 1909) and designed by Washington architect B. Stanley Simmons.

Over the years, the two-story storefront arcade was altered to accommodate a variety of commercial uses. The first alteration, in 1904 when the building was purchased by the American Bank, was the work of local architect B. Stanley Simmons. Minor changes to the exterior included the placement of cast-iron screens and bars over the windows at the first and second floor archways, the placement of a marquise over the main entrance, and the removal of the east wall of the light well from the third floor to the roof. The interior was remodeled more heavily. Here Simmons redesigned the two-story open lobby and mezzanine into a single open banking room. This necessitated the removal of the mezzanine, the reversal of the stairway (located between the elevators) from the first to the second floor, the removal and relocation of the central hallway to the west side of the building, and the replacement of four cast-iron columns that supported the mezzanine with steel columns running to the ceiling of the room.

In 1907, an additional story (the ninth) was added to the rear of the building and was topped by a large copper dome. This work was also the design of B. Stanley Simmons for use by the Interstate Commerce Commission as its Hearing Room.

In 1927, storefronts were applied at street level to accommodate the lobby area's change from banking to commercial use. This alteration marked the beginning of a series of remodelings of the storefronts and accompanying interior spaces (1930, 1950, 1970) that drastically altered the street-level appearance of the building. During one remodeling, the rusticated facing of the marble piers of the two lower stories and the balcony were chipped off. The main entrance was moved from the center to the west arch. The exposed upper openings of the arches were filled with stucco. When the Sun Building was recently renovated, these alterations were removed and the original facade organization and materials were meticulously restored.

The building's interior is organized in a C-shaped plan. The central section is indented to the east by a large light well from the third to ninth floor and incorporates a service core with two elevators and the stair to the west. To the north and

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

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

For NPS use only

received 1/26/84

date entered

Continuation sheet

Item number 7

Page 4 of 7

south of the central core are office spaces fanning out around a central hall.

In 1887, the Evening Star described the building's fine interior spaces:

An attractive feature of the building is the wide and lofty entrance, which is handsomely finished in mahogany with great doors of the same wood. The flooring is of colored marble tiling...From the entrance hall an elaborate iron and marble staircase ascends to the top of the building. On each side of the staircase are large elevators.⁵

The rich interior of the building centered about a nine-story marble stair with a brass handrail and intricate cast-iron balustrade in a foliate design. Oak moldings, fine hardware, and heavy ornamental cast-iron mantels with the sunburst motif and other decorations appear throughout the offices.

Today, the Sun Building retains the exuberant character and strong visual presence that distinguished it in 1887. Its exterior has been carefully restored to the original design. Only the demolished steeple could not be rebuilt. The upper interior spaces retain their original finishes and detailing. The interior commercial spaces and lobby were returned to the original conformation, while accommodating modern conveniences and complying with building and safety codes.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

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

For NPS use only

received 12/6/87

date entered

Continuation sheet

Item number

7

Page 5 of 7

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Evening Star, April 23, 1887
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.

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

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

For NPS use only

received 12/6/84

date entered

Continuation sheet

Item number 7

Page 6 of 7

ALTERATIONS

<u>Date</u>	<u>Alteration</u>
1904	REMOVED EAST WALL OF LIGHT WELL FROM 3rd FLOOR TO ROOF. ADDED CAST IRON SCREENS AND BARS PLACED OVER EXTERIOR WINDOWS AT 1st AND 2nd FLOOR ARCHWAYS. ADDED DOOR MARQUISE AT MAIN ENTRANCE. Mezzanine Floor removed. First floor center hallway wall removed. Hallway rebuilt at west side 8 feet wide, one story high. Main stairway reversed from 1st to the 2nd floor. Replaced the four cast iron columns supporting the mezzanine and replaced with steel columns running to ceiling of the new banking room.
1905	Cut openings in rear of elevators.
1907	ERECTED ADDITIONAL STORY ON REAR OF BUILDING. CONSTRUCTED COPPER DOME. Cut window openings in west party wall.
1909	Changed elevators from steam to direct acting hydraulic plunger type.
1912	Cut window in east wall at 8th floor.
1919	Rearranged rear portion of 1st floor for a safe deposit department of bank. Altered partitions.
1921	Cut window in east wall at 9th floor.
1922	Constructed penthouse above elevator shaft to house elevator machinery. Excavated elevator shaft pit. Installed two electric elevators (cabs were retained, machinery converted).
1923	Removed and relocated interior non-bearing partitions, relocated toilets from 1st floor to basement and 2nd floors. Installed one flight of stairs to basement.

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

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

For NPS use only

received 12/6/84

date entered

Continuation sheet

Item number 7

Page 7 of 7

- 1927 REMOVED CAST IRON SCREENS AND BARS FROM FRONT FACADE. APPLIED EAST AND WEST STORE FRONTS. Constructed new mezzanine. Installed new toilet rooms on all floors. Remodeled toilet rooms on all floors.
- 1930 APPLIED NEW SHOW WINDOWS.
- 1950s REMOVED STEEPLE. APPLIED NEW STOREFRONTS. Removed balcony, capitals, water table, and rusticated surface of stone. Remodeled interiors on 1st floor. Installed terrazzo floor in lobby.
- 1970 APPLIED NEW STOREFRONT. Remodeled interiors on 1st floor.
- 1982-3 RESTORED ORIGINAL BUILDING FACADE AND INTERIORS.

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

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

For NPS use only

received 12/6/84

date entered

Continuation sheet

Item number 8

Page 2 of 11

The Sun Building is an excellent example of the work undertaken by Mullett in private practice in the District of Columbia after leaving his position as Supervising Architect of the Treasury.

- 2) The exuberant, rich and imaginative design of the Sun Building is significant in the context of the post Civil War commercial development of the District of Columbia's Old Downtown area. The Sun Building has been a city landmark in the literal, visual sense since its construction in 1885-87. The fine 1982-3 restoration of this distinctive building has similar significance for today's revitalization of the Old Downtown area.
- 3) One of the earliest examples in the District of Columbia of a nineteenth century new building type, the tall elevator office building, the Sun Building is significant for its innovative structural system, fireproof construction and passenger elevator.
- 4) Designed to express the corporate image in Washington of The Baltimore Sun, the Sun Building is significant in the commercial and journalistic history of the District of Columbia.

The Architect

Alfred Bult Mullett, noted architect of the Sun Building, had a distinguished career as an architect which spanned approximately 30 years and encompassed several distinctive periods. Mullett's prominence derives from his long public service as Supervising Architect of the U.S. Treasury. His early career in this position made him responsible for the planning and direction of significant federal buildings nationwide between 1866 and 1874. He designed an enormous number of buildings. Most were marked by large scale and elaborate detail. Lawrence Wodehouse writes in a study of Mullett's work:

Mullett was soon to establish himself as an outstanding designer of the Second Empire style. His designs were

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

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

For NPS use only

received 12/4/84

date entered

Continuation sheet

Item number 8

Page 3 of 11

rich in classical details, with numerous columns and pilasters, elaborate pediments above decorative windows, wide projecting cornices, bracketed Italianate eaves and high Mansard roofs with cast-iron Baroque porthole windows, as was evident in the Court House and Post Office (1867-71), demolished 1929, Madison, Wis. The Custom House and Post Office (1873-82), demolished 1933-4, at Hartford, Conn. had the same richness though these two buildings are small compared to Mullett's giant federal buildings in Boston (1869-74), New York City (1869-75), St. Louis (1873-84), Philadelphia (1874-84), Cincinnati (1874-8), and the State, War and Navy Building (now the Executive Office Building, 1874-88) at Washington, D.C.....

Of these six structures, only two remain: the Custom House, Court House and Post Office at St. Louis¹ and the State, War and Navy Building, Washington, D.C.

Although best known for his giant federal structures and deft designs in the Second Empire style, Mullett's work is characterized by several different styles. The San Francisco Mint was in the classical style; the Old State, War and Navy is in the Second Empire style. Other commissions for which he was responsible have a vastly different and far simpler design; for instance, the Castine, Maine Post Office and Customs House was built in a restrained Italianate design. Mullett adapted his designs to suit the needs and tastes of his clients at all levels. Mullett was always very much involved in design development. He took a personal interest in the design of each commission, kept a tight rein on projects, and signed all the drawings which came from his office. ² The Sun Building, designed later in his career, is but one part of the rich tapestry of his work and fits into a true understanding of its range and scope.

Mullett resigned from the position of Supervising Architect of the U.S. Treasury in 1874. The Sun Building is a product of the last 15 years of his career (1875-1890) when, after a fallow period immediately following his resignation, he returned to work and was joined in a successful practice by his two sons, Thomas A. and Frederick M., and by J.F. Denson.

Given his already established pattern of active participation in

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

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

For NPS use only

received 1/26/84

date entered

Continuation sheet

Item number 8

Page 4 of 11

design, it is safe to assume that Mullett continued to exercise a strong design lead. When his sons joined their father in practice, they were young and most probably students. They were described as draftsmen in City Directories at that time. Thomas A. Mullett went on to have an active professional career in which he was awarded many important commissions in Washington and other cities. He designed the Farmers and Merchants Bank Building, the Capitol Park Hotel and many homes for prominent citizens. Denson was for some time an assistant in the Supervising Architect's Office, and was chief assistant in Mullett's office before he was admitted to partnership.

The firm Alfred Bult Mullett and Company had as its focus the design of commercial offices, houses, hospitals, chapels, and other structures in the City of Washington. Mullett's Washington designs made notable contributions to the cityscape and reflected the state of the art of contemporary building technology. Approximately forty buildings³ were designed in this last phase of Mullett's life, including the Sun Building, W.B. Moses Great Store, the new National Theater⁴, the Cornwell Building, Central National Bank Building⁵, the residences of Chief Justice Richardson and General Noah L. Jefferies (now the Nigerian Embassy), the Logan Memorial Chapel, the Mexican Legation and others. Most have been demolished (including the noted Mexican Legation).

Today the Central National Bank (the Apex Building) on Pennsylvania Avenue, several residences near the corner of Pennsylvania Avenue and 25th Street⁶, and the Sun Building are the only major structures which remain from this period.

Transitional and Innovative Character of the Sun Building

Even at the time of its construction, the Sun Building was considered a significant addition to the city, an innovative and modern structure representing new attitudes and technological approaches to design. The Evening Star heralded its significance:

'The Sun Building' marks, it is believed, a new era in building in Washington. Of the large business structures

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

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

For NPS use only

received 12/6/84

date entered

Continuation sheet

Item number 8

Page 5 of 11

of a substantial and costly character recently erected, 'The Sun Building' is the most notable, both on account of its size, its cost, and its architectural features.⁷

Indeed, the Sun Building is a rare transitional building in many respects in the city. It was built in the context of the rapidly developing "skyscraper" era. The commercial office building was essentially a product of the late 19th century, as burgeoning cities and technological breakthroughs made the push for the sky both necessary and possible. The Sun Building exhibits important elements of the changes taking place and exemplifies several technological innovations that fostered this new tall building style:

Structural Framework. The rapid development of structural engineering made the skeleton frame building a safe and acceptable method of construction. The Sun Building has an interesting and rare transitional structural framework.

In this country, the new skeleton frames were ushered in by William LeBaron Jenny's Home Insurance Company Building (Chicago, 1884-5) which employed a metal skeleton of cast-iron columns, sheathed in masonry with wrought iron beams. The Monadnock Building (Chicago, 1889) was the last of the great load-bearing tall buildings. Its 16-story steel frame construction with masonry cross walls pushed the load-bearing wall to its limits.

The Sun Building, built at the cutting edge of these rapid structural changes, is a rare early example in Washington of the new skeleton frame buildings that were to change the shape of American building. It has an interesting, highly transitional structural framework which incorporates both the old and the new building technologies. The building is constructed of wrought iron I-beams combined with bolted cast-iron columns and cross walls of brick and masonry. The transitional character of this is best illustrated by the fact that on the lower floor structural weight is clearly carried by load-bearing columns whose utilitarian function is ameliorated by decorative designs. On the upper floors, the architect accedes to more traditional building technology by reintroducing load-bearing cross walls which carry weight down to those same first floor columns. The Sun Building was most probably the city of Washington's first "skyscraper."⁸ (The section in this application on "The Sun Building's Place in Washington's Commercial Development"

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

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

For NPS use only

received 1/2/6/84

date entered

Continuation sheet

Item number 8

Page 6 of 11

elaborates on this point.)

Moreover, the Sun Building is a rare survivor of the early period of tall buildings in the United States. It is one of the few remaining tall buildings nationwide from the early skyscraper era.

Passenger Elevator. The invention by Elisha Graves Otis of the safety device for elevators gave birth to the passenger elevator. In Washington, the Sun Building was one of the earliest to use the new invention.

The fast, safe passenger elevator, invented by Otis in 1853, removed a major prejudice against height. In this country, it was first used in the 1857 Haughwout Department Store in New York. In Washington, the Sun's elevator was certainly an early (if not the earliest) use of the new invention. James Goode's Capital Losses reports that the eight-story McGill Building (1891) "along with the nearby Atlantic Building (1888) on F Street near 10th Street, N.W., was one of the first office buildings in the city built with an elevator,"⁹ but the Sun's elevator, dating from 1887, predates even these.

Fireproof Construction. Fire hazards in tall buildings were reduced by new emphasis on fireproof construction. The Sun Building was "one of the first in the city to be constructed along fireproof lines."¹⁰

In the late 19th century, there was considerable concern about the fire hazards inherent in building tall structures. Architects sought design and technological solutions to the problem and worked to produce "fireproof" buildings.

The new emphasis on fireproof construction was incorporated into the design of the Sun Building. The Sun Building was lauded for its new fireproof design:

The construction of the building is fireproof throughout and during the twenty months which elapsed between breaking ground and its completion, no opportunity has been omitted for obtaining the best material and using it in the most substantial and workmanlike style.¹¹

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

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

For NPS use only

received

12/6/84

date entered

Continuation sheet

Item number 8

Page 7 of 11

The Sun Building's Place in Washington's Commercial Development

At the time of its construction, Washington's Sun Building was a prominent feature of the city's skyline. It stands as one of the city's finest and earliest examples of the tall commercial office buildings which first appeared in the late 19th century. It has been repeatedly recognized as "the city's first skyscraper,"¹² and "the first of the high buildings to be erected in Washington."¹³ Its 172-foot tower was a landmark until it was dismantled in the 1950s (after it was condemned for safety reasons). The attached photograph shows the Sun Building's prominent place on the city's skyline in 1890.¹⁴ At the time of its construction, the importance of the building's commercial character was heralded:

The completion of the large building on the north side of F Street, between 13th and 14th streets, erected by the proprietor of the Baltimore Sun, and known as 'The Sun Building,' marks, it is believed, a new era in building in Washington. Of the large business structures of a substantial and costly character recently erected, 'The Sun Building' is the most notable, both on account of its size, its cost, and its architectural features. It is the most expensive private building ever erected in Washington. Its huge and elegant front would make it a conspicuous object among the splendid business structures on Broadway, New York, or upon any of the famed thoroughfares of the large cities of the country.¹⁵

Located in Washington's old downtown, the Sun Building was erected along F Street ridge. This area was originally residential, but by the last quarter of the 19th century it had become solidly commercial. The Sun Building holds a significant place in this downtown commercial development in the city. The Sun and the International Building, to the west, form a mid-block focus for the streetscape of smaller commercial buildings dating from the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The Sun Building was owned by A.S. Abell, publisher of The Baltimore Sun and constructed for use by the Baltimore Sun Publishing Company as its Washington news bureau. The company prided itself on the innovative and handsome buildings that served as its headquarters. This is evidenced not only with this building, but also by the precedent the company had set with the

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

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

For NPS use only

received

2/6/84

date entered

Continuation sheet

Item number 8

Page 8 of 11

Baltimore headquarters building designed by New York architect James Bogardus:

The time had arrived for The Sun to occupy a building which should mark its place among the institutions of the city (Baltimore). To that end Mr. Bogardus, of New York, the builder of the first cast-iron building in the United States, indeed the inventor of iron houses, was employed to erect the graceful iron building at the corner of Baltimore and South Street, to which, on September 31 (sic), 1851, the paper was removed. The building has continued to be admired for the beauty of its proportions and appropriateness of its decorative features, not withstanding the infancy of the art of construction in iron at the time of its erection. The proprietor of The Sun has done not a little to the embellishment of the city with handsome and useful buildings. He is, in fact, the largest tax payer on real estate in the city.

Within the last year, The Sun has erected on F Street, in Washington, The Sun Building, the most imposing private structure at the national capital. Rising eight lofty stories above the pavement on F Street, the building presents an example of beauty, strength, and proportion unexcelled even by the public structures of the government. The frontage of 53 feet and depth of 113 feet give an area which its eight stories multiply into many splendid apartments, in one of which the interstate commerce commission has its office. This splendid structure is the home of The Sun's Washington Bureau, which was established in the earliest years of the paper, and has obtained a reputation for accuracy of statement, careful examination into public affairs, reliability and judgement not surpassed, if equaled, by the Washington bureau of any newspaper.

Further, the Baltimore Sun Publishing Company had set a precedent, even before construction of its Washington office, of technological innovation:

On the 12th of October, 1882, Edison's incandescent electric light was first introduced in Baltimore by The Sun -- being the first building in Maryland lighted by the new light. In The Sun Building nearly 200 of these lights were used. Since that introduction by The Sun,

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

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

For NPS use only

received

12/6/84

date entered

Continuation sheet

Item number

8

Page

9 of 11

and mainly resulting from the success attained in a building so large and important, the system has spread largely throughout the city. 17

The Baltimore Sun Publishing Company was the first out-of-town newspaper to construct its own headquarters in the city at a time when The Sun was the predominant newspaper in the region (and the only local paper of any stature, The Star, was in its infancy). The building served as the Company's news bureau. This move to a Washington office was a result of:

an expansion of The Sun's circulation and prestige. That expansion required, of course, a development of the Washington staff, which had always been a special care of the editors... The first floor was occupied by the Washington staff of The Sun, with room for a counting room which booked subscriptions and advertisements. Upstairs there were tenants... The building was sold in 1907 and The Sun's Washington bureau began a series of migrations....18

For many years, office space available in the building was leased to a large number of journalists and news bureaus as well as to other businesses requiring office space in the busy downtown. Journalistic activity flourished in this general area of Washington; 14th Street between E and F Streets came to be known as "Newspaper Row." As early as 1871 there were 19 out-of-town newspaper offices in the area.

The Sun Building is notable not only as the first headquarters of an out-of-town newspaper in the city, but also for its other tenants. The Interstate Commerce Commission occupied the Sun Building from its founding in 1887 until 1918. It was responsible for adding the copper-clad dome on the rear of the ninth floor in 1903, designed by the eminent architect, B.S. Simmons. This newly created hall with an 18-foot ceiling was used as the main hearing room.

Several illustrious tenants occupied the building in the 1920s. Daniel Loper, Roosevelt's first Secretary of Commerce and Colby and Wilson, attorneys (Bainbridge, Colby and Woodrow Wilson) had their offices in the Sun Building (then known as the American Bank Building). In addition, the building served as the headquarters for the newly created Federal Bureau of Investigation in the early 1920s.

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

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

For NPS use only

received

12/6/84

date entered

Continuation sheet

Item number

8

Page 10 of 11

A study of city directories after 1914 shows that the major portion of the Sun was occupied by a variety of businesses. While a bank and candy/cigar store were permanent fixtures on the ground floor, the upper floors housed such diverse occupants as lawyers, milliners, embassies, violin makers, schools and charitable organizations.

Current Status of Mullett's Work in Washington

As previously noted, of the original significant body of Mullett's work in Washington, little remains. The Old State, War and Navy Building (the Executive Office Building), the Central National Bank (the Apex Building), the Sun Building and several residences are all that have escaped demolition.

The Central National Bank has been recognized by its designation as a Category II Landmark in the City of Washington. The Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation has recognized the strong significance of the Central National Bank and has not only incorporated it as a major component in the restoration and development of Pennsylvania Avenue, but has incorporated it as a pivotal structure in its plan for the Avenue.

The Sun Building Associates have also recognized the outstanding design and structural character of the Sun Building and have executed a painstaking and detailed restoration/renovation of the building. This recently completed restoration has been approved for certification pursuant to the Economic Recovery Act of 1981, as a rehabilitation which meets the Secretary of the Interior's standards.

The Sun Building has been a focal point for Washington's commercial downtown from the time of its construction. It introduced innovations in design and technology that would mark a new era for commercial buildings. It became a prominent feature in the developing city's skyline and today it is a remaining example of the work of the skilled hand of A.B. Mullett. It continues to represent the skill and inventiveness of America's architects.

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service
National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form**

For NPS use only

received 12/6/84

date entered

Continuation sheet

Item number 8

Page 11 of 11

FOOTNOTES

- 1 "General Grant Architecture in Jeopardy," Historic Preservation, Vol. 22, No. 1, January-March 1970, p. 24.
- 2 Mullett also signed the Sun Building drawings.
- 3 From an interview with Donald Lehman, noted biographer of Mullett.
- 4 Which Mullett rebuilt after a major fire.
- 5 To which Mullett made a major alteration, notably the twin towers.
- 6 Massachusetts Avenue Architecture, v. 2. Washington, D.C.: The Commission of Fine Arts, 1975.
- 7 Evening Star, April 23, 1887.
- 8 Although the term "skyscraper" came into use as late as the 1890s.
- 9 Capital Losses; A Cultural History of Washington's Destroyed Buildings, by James M. Goode. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1979.
- 10 Star, April 29, 1935.
- 11 Evening Star, April 23, 1887.
- 12 The Sun Papers of Baltimore, 1837-1937, by H.L. Mencken, Hamilton Owens, Frank R. Kent and Gerold W. Johnson. Baltimore: Baltimore Sun Publishing Co., 1937.
- 13 Centennial History of the City of Washington, D.C., published by H.W. Crew by the United Brethren Publishing House. Dayton, Ohio: W.J. Shuey, Publisher, 1892.
- 14 Photographic detail from Old Washington, D.C. in Early Views, by Robert Reed, New York: Dover Publications, 1980.
- 15 Evening Star, April 23, 1887.
- 16 The Sun, May 17, 1887
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 The Sun Papers of Baltimore

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form

For NPS use only

received 12/6/84

date entered

Continuation sheet

Item number

9

Page 1 of 4

SUN BIBLIOGRAPHY

THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS

"Alfred B. Mullett and his French Style Government Buildings," by Lawrence Wodehouse. Society of Architectural Historians Journal, v.31, #1, March 1972, p. 22-37.

"Electric Elevators." American Architect and Building News, v.46, October 27, 1984, p. 31-34.

Encyclopedia of Architectural Technology, ed. Pedro Guedes. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co.

Executive Office Building, by Donald Lehman. General Services Administration, Historical Study No. 3, 1970.

"General Grant Architecture in Jeopardy" by Lawrence Wodehouse. Historic Preservation, v.22, #1, January-March 1970, p. 20-26.

(obituary, A.B. Mullett) American Architect and Building News, v.30, October 25, 1890, p. 45.

Skeleton Construction in Buildings, by William H. Birkmire. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1894.

THE BALTIMORE SUNPAPERS

Collected archival records, the Baltimore Sun Publishing Company.

The Sun Papers of Baltimore, 1837-1937, by H.L. Mencken, Hamilton Owens, Frank R. Kent and Gerald W. Johnson. Baltimore: Baltimore Sun Publishing Co., 1937.

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

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

For NPS use only

received 12/6/84

date entered

Continuation sheet

Item number 9

Page 2 of 4

COLUMBIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Collected records (A.B. Mullett, F Street, Early Skyscrapers),
Archives, The Columbia Historical Society.

Downtown Survey, Don't Tear It Down. Washington, D.C.: 1980.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

American Buildings and Their Architects, by William H. Jordy.
Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1972.

American Building; the Historical Forces that Shaped It, by James
Marston Fitch. New York: Shocken Books, 1973.

Biographical Dictionary of American Architects (Deceased), by
Henry F. Withey, AIA, and Elsie Rathburn Withey. Los Angeles:
New Age Publishing Co., 1970.

Capital Losses; A Cultural History of Washington's Destroyed
Buildings, by James Goode. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian
Institution Press, 1979.

Frances Benjamin Johnston Collection (lot 11727), Prints and
Photographs, Library of Congress.

Science and Building; Structural and Environmental Design in the
Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, by Henry J. Cowan. New York:
John Wiley and Sons, 1978.

The Sun

May 17, 1887 "The Sun's 50th Birthday"

May 17, 1887 (supplement) "The Sun's Golden Jubilee"

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

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

For NPS use only

received 12/6/84

date entered

Continuation sheet

Item number

9

Page 3 of 4

MARTIN LUTHER KING LIBRARY, WASHINGTONIANA ROOM

Boyd's Directory of the District of Columbia. Washington, D.C.

Centennial History of the City of Washington, D.C., published by H.W. Crew by United Brethren Publishing House. Dayton, Ohio: W.J. Shuey, Publisher, 1892.

"History of Architecture in Washington," by Appleton J. Clark, in Washington, Past and Present, v.2. Washington, D.C.: 1929.

Illustrated Washington: Our Capital, 1890. New York: American Publishing and Engraving Co., 1890.

Massachusetts Avenue Architecture, v.2. Washington, D.C.: The Commission of Fine Arts, 1975.

Old Washington, D.C. in Early Views, by Robert Reed, New York: Dover Publications, 1980.

The Star

Evening Star

April 23, 1887 "The New Sun Building -- Completion of the Large and Elegant Building on F Street."

February 21, 1889 "Star's Relation to Newspaper Row" (Correspondance in "The Journalist")

October 25, 1942 (photo) "The Steeple Atop the Building at 1317 F Street Will Be Torn Down..."

November 13, 1950 (complete citation unavailable)

Star

April 29, 1935 "1315-17 F Street Sold for \$450,000"

Sunday Star

October 6, 1929 "Distinction to Early F Street," by John Clagett Proctor.

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

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

For NPS use only

received 12/6/84

date entered

Continuation sheet

Item number

9

Page 4 of 4

"Retracing Lost Footsteps at Fourteenth and F Streets,"
John Clagett Proctor (from an unidentified vertical
file).

Times Herald, October 24, 1942, "F Street Steeple Donated to
Scrap Drive."

Vertical Files ("Streets," "Office Buildings"), Proctor File.

Washington Post

October 21, 1890 "A.B. Mullett's Suicide"

December 6, 1927

October 24, 1942

Yesterday's Washington, D.C., by Charles Ewing. Miami: E.A.
Seaman Publishing, Inc., 1976.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE

District of Columbia Building Permits, Record Group 66.

INTERVIEWS

William S. Abell, President, Baltimore Sun Publishing Company.

Perry Fisher, Executive Director, Columbia Historical Society.

Antoinette Lee, Architectural Historian conducting a study of the
U.S. Office of the Supervising Architect of the Treasury.

Donald Lehman, biographer of A.B. Mullett and author of The
Executive Office Building.

Rod Ross, historian, Old Executive Office Building.

Clement G. Vitek, Chief Librarian, the Baltimore Sunpapers.

Tony P. Wrenn, Archivist, the American Institute of Architects.



This view of the Sun Building was depicted on the Sesquicentennial Souvenir of the Sun distributed in 1887.
(From the Archives, the Sunpapers.)