

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

For NPS use only

National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form

received
date entered

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

1. Name

historic Mission Beach Roller Coaster

and/or common Belmont Amusement Park Roller Coaster ("Earthquake") ("Big Dipper")

2. Location

street & number 3000 Mission Boulevard not for publication

city, town San Diego vicinity of

state California code 04 county San Diego code 073

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"/> building(s)	<input type="checkbox"/> private	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> museum
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> structure	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> commercial
<input type="checkbox"/> site	Public Acquisition	Accessible	<input type="checkbox"/> educational
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government
		<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial
			<input type="checkbox"/> military
			<input type="checkbox"/> other:

4. Owner of Property

name See Continuation Sheet

street & number

city, town vicinity of state

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. County Recorder's Office

street & number 1222 First Avenue

city, town San Diego state California

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title City of San Diego Historical Site Board Register No. 90 has this property been determined eligible? yes no

date 1973 federal state county local

depository for survey records City Administration Building, Planning Department

city, town San Diego state California

7. Description

Condition		Check one	Check one
<input type="checkbox"/> excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> deteriorated	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> unaltered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> original site
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> good	<input type="checkbox"/> ruins	<input type="checkbox"/> altered	moved date
<input type="checkbox"/> fair	<input type="checkbox"/> unexposed		

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

Summary

The "Earthquake" is a wooden roller coaster with rolled steel tracks. It has an irregular "footprint" approximately 100 by 500 feet and "hills" that reach a height of 75 feet. Its tracks total about 2,800 linear feet. The structure is oriented with its length along a north/south axis paralleling the beach strand between the Pacific Ocean and Mission Bay. The tracks reach their highest points at each end with various intermediate rises and plateaus. The curved "Belmont" entrance sign is off center left on the west side, mounted on the structural framework below a correspondingly curved section of the tracks.¹

A tunnel-like building, or "terminal," on the west side of the coaster, to the left of the entrance, is accessory to the basic structure. It houses the ticket booth and mechanical equipment, and provides the stopping place for the cars when loading and unloading passengers; it is open on both ends, with a wood frame and gabled roof, and is sheathed with corrugated metal and wood siding. A portion of the terminal building was repaired in 1957 after a 1954 fire. It has been painted various colors from time to time.

"Earthquake" is situated on a narrow sandy spit between the Pacific Ocean and Mission Bay, in the northeast corner of the site of the former Belmont Amusement Park. The Mission Beach Bathhouse building, completed in 1925, is just west of "Earthquake." It contains a larger than Olympic-size swimming pool, The Plunge, which is still in use. "Earthquake," the Bathhouse building, and the roller rink (to the south of the coaster) are the only remaining structures of more than 30 that once existed in the park. (The bathhouse and the roller rink will be considered for inclusion at a later point in the recreation theme study.)

"Earthquake" is at the southwest corner of the main street intersection in Mission Beach--Mission Boulevard, running north and south, and Ventura Place, starting from the beach and extending east. Because of the consistently low building scale of Mission Beach coupled with the flat topography of the strand, and the openness of Mission Bay and park areas to the east, the roller coaster continues to dominate the local landscape and serves as a symbol of the community's recreational character.

Footnote

¹ This description draws on that prepared by Anthony A. and Lisa Ciani, "National Register of Historic Places Nomination, Mission Beach Roller Coaster," 1978.

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	architecture	education	military	social/
1700-1799	art	engineering	music	humanitarian
1800-1899	commerce	exploration settlement	philosophy	theater
X 1900-	communications	industry	politics government	transportation
		invention		X other (specify) (Recreation)

Specific dates 1925 **Builder Architect** (Thomas) Frank Prior and Frederick A. Church

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

Summary

The "Earthquake" roller coaster is one of the two large wooden scaffolded roller coasters with structural integrity that remain on the West Coast.¹ Although built slightly later than the other, the "Big Dipper" at Santa Cruz, California, erected by Arthur Looff using a Prior and Church license, "Earthquake" is the only one on the West Coast built by Frank Prior and Frederick A. Church themselves that remains. In the nation as a whole, only one other extant design, the "Dragon Coaster" (1928), at "Playland" in Rye, New York, survives of some 30 by this noted firm of whom it has been stated, in referring to the select fraternity of roller coaster designers:

Perhaps no two gentlemen stand out more than Prior and Church, whose designs were once considered pristine adaptations of ideas no one ever considered before.²

"Earthquake" also is the prime survivor and the most visible symbol of the Mission Beach Amusement Center (later Belmont Amusement Park), the celebrated centerpiece of sugar heir John D. Spreckels' ambitious early 20th-century recreational development at Mission Beach.

History

The Mission Beach Company, owned indirectly by John D. Spreckels and his brother Adolph, developed the Mission Beach community in 1914-25, constructing a bridge to San Diego proper, boardwalks along the ocean and bay, streets, and utilities. Their San Diego Electric Railway Company completed a streetcar line across the bridge to Mission Beach in 1924, and a terminal in 1925. The Spreckelses built the Mission Beach Amusement Center, at a cost of approximately \$2,500,000, to stimulate real estate sales and attract street car passengers.

Architect Lincoln Rogers and his associate F. W. Stevenson drew up the comprehensive plan for the Spreckels brothers. To construct the roller coaster, Prior and Church, who then operated out of Venice, California, were retained. Most of their work was centered in California, especially at Venice, Santa Monica, and Long Beach. They were well known for a series of racing coasters featuring "Chase Through the Clouds" or similar names, but had recently begun building "Bobs"-type coasters, ones that featured trailer-type cars connected by ball couplers on plans that featured tight curves on high elevation tracks. "Bobs"-type coasters already built by them included the "Bobs" at Riverview Park, in Chicago, and the "Tornado" at Coney Island, New York (both now destroyed).³

9. Major Bibliographical References

SEE CONTINUATION SHEET

10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of nominated property 1.16

Quadrangle name LaJolla

Quadrangle scale 1:24,000

UTM References

A

1	1	4	7	6	5	8	10	3	6	2	5	8	10
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

SEE CONTINUATION SHEET

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 James H. Charleton

organization History Division, National Park Service date October 30, 1984

street & number 1100 "L" Street, NW telephone (202) 343-8165

city or town Washington state DC 20240

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

title date

For NPS use only

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

date

Keeper of the National Register

Attest:

date

Chief of Registration

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When it opened in 1925 the amusement center also included the Mission Beach Bath House, with a 60'-X-175' indoor sea water swimming pool (The Plunge); the Mission Beach Ball Room, featuring a dance pavilion and cafe; the Mission Beach Roller (skating) Rink; the Luna Park Fun House, an exact reproduction of Le Palais des Joies in Paris; a large carousel; and a paved parking area for more than 1500 autos. Spreckels intended the amusement center to be an elaborate attraction. The pool was said to be the largest in the country, the Fun House the first of its kind in the United States, the carousel the largest in California, and the roller coaster the largest on the West Coast. Herbert S. Burns, who had been Florenz Ziegfeld's stage manager at the New Amsterdam Theater in New York City for two rooftop revues, and then director of the Ziegfeld Follies for a year, became the general manager of amusements and concessions for the Mission Beach Company.

John D. Spreckels, "the Step-father" of San Diego,⁴ and his brother were the leading magnates of the city. At one time or another, between 1887, when John Spreckels arrived in San Diego, and his death in 1926, they owned the south side of Broadway from the Bay to the Plaza, as well as all of Coronado and North Island. They also acquired the Southern California Mountain Water Company; the San Diego Electric Railway, which they rebuilt and rerouted; the Union-Tribune newspaper; and the First National Bank. In addition, they completed the San Diego and Arizona Eastern Railway, the Lower Otay Dam, and the Hotel del Coronado;⁵ built the San Diego Hotel, the Union Building, the Spreckels Theater, and the Golden West Hotel in downtown San Diego; and donated the Spreckels Organ Pavilion in Balboa Park.⁶

After John Spreckels' death in 1926, his family company donated the Mission Beach Amusement Center to the city through the State Park Commission. In 1939 the State gave the city full title to the center. The name was changed to Belmont Park in 1954 when the city negotiated a 20-year lease with Jack Ray, a Canadian amusement park designer. Ray redesigned the park with an emphasis on family entertainment and renamed it for a friend in Canada who had introduced him to amusement parks. That same year, the roller coaster (owned by a separate company, but on city land) caught fire and had to be closed down. Unable to make repairs, the coaster company declared bankruptcy in 1957 and sold the roller coaster to Ray, who reopened it. Ray died in 1965, and in 1969 his widow sold the remainder of the park lease to MBA, Inc., who continued to operate the park until 1977.

In that year, the city permitted M.B.A., Inc., to remove or demolish all of the structures and rides except the roller coaster, the Plunge, and the roller rink. The City then tentatively decided to demolish the roller coaster to allow for a "passive" park.⁷

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A group of local citizens, however, who believed that the roller coaster should be preserved, formed the "Save the Coaster Committee, Inc." They used a National Trust consultant service grant to study the feasibility of its preservation, and, in 1982, won approval of the city council to assume ownership of the coaster and lease the land on which it rests from the city. The Committee plans to restore the coaster, including reviving its original brilliant color scheme, and possibly operate it for the public.⁸

Footnotes

- 1 This statement of significance draws generously from that prepared by Anthony A. and Lisa Ciani, "National Register of Historic Places Nomination, Mission Beach Roller Coaster," 1978.
- 2 Richard W. Munch, President, American Coaster Enthusiasts, "Case Study: The Design Firm of Prior and Church," January 4, 1982, pp. 1-2.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Florence Christman, The Romance of Balboa Park (San Diego: Neyenesch Printers, 1973), p. 40.
- 5 The Hotel del Coronado is a National Historic Landmark for its architecture.
- 6 Spreckels Organ Pavilion is within the existing Balboa Park National Historic Landmark.
- 7 "Belmont Park Status Report," Report to the Honorable Mayor and City Council from the City Manager (San Diego: November 11, 1977), p. 1.
- 8 Save the Coaster Committee, Inc. "Development Plan, January 15, 1983" (San Diego, California), passim.

Owner of Property

Hon. Roger Hedgecock
Mayor, City of San Diego
202 C Street
San Diego, California 92109

Save the Coaster Committee
P.O. Box 83067
San Diego, California 92138

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Christman, Florence. The Romance of Balboa Park. San Diego: Neyenesch Printers, 1973.

Kyriazi, Gary. The Great American Amusement Parks, A Pictorial History. Secaucus, New Jersey: Citadel Press, 1976.

Munch, Richard W., President, American Coaster Enthusiasts. "Case Study: The Design Firm of Prior and Church," January 4, 1982. 2 pp.

Pourade, Richard. The Glory Years. San Diego: San Diego Union-Tribune Publishing Company, 1964.

"Roller Coaster Buffs Hold Convention," Los Angeles Times, June 10, 1978, I, p. 1.

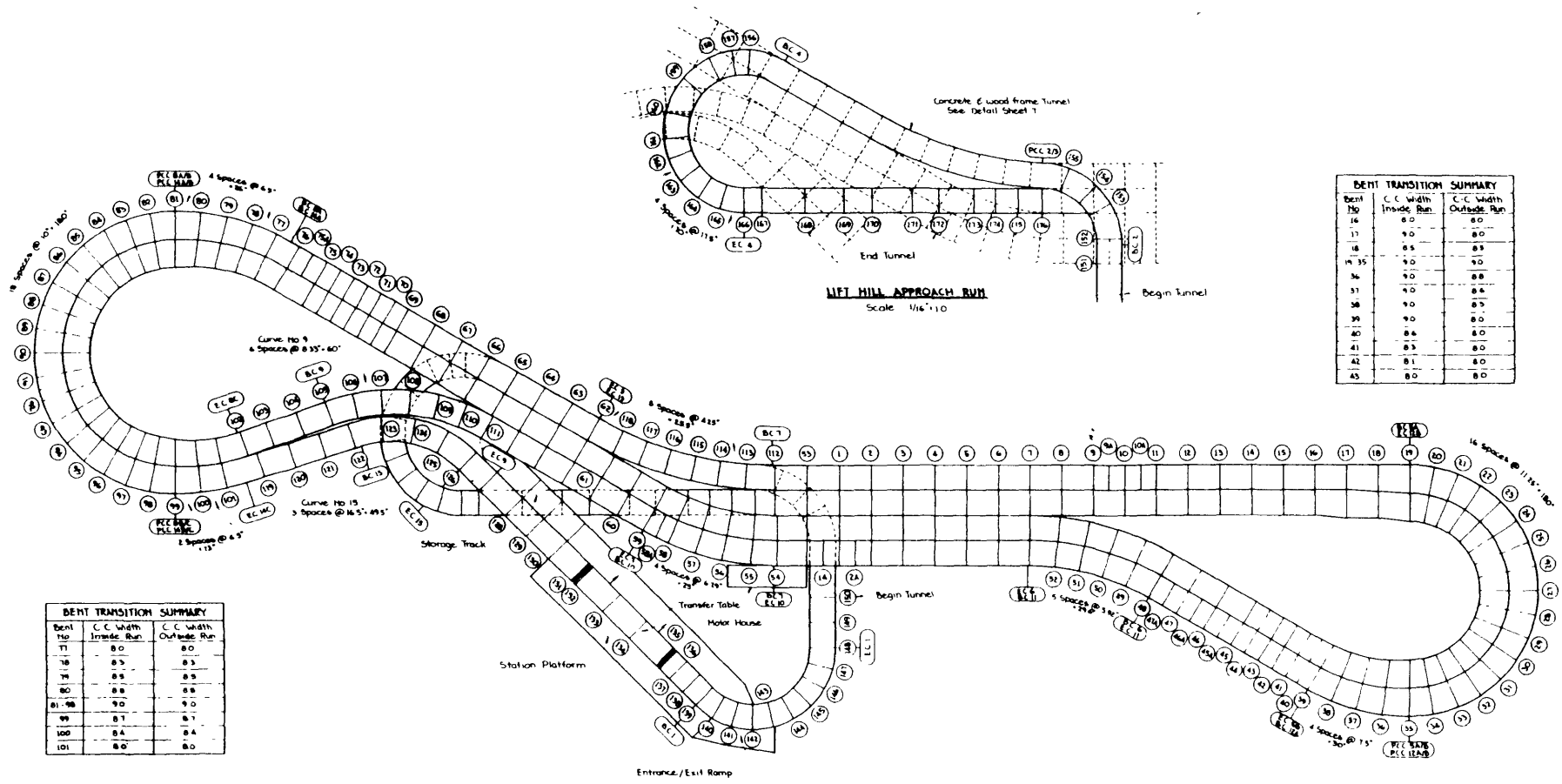
Save the Coaster Committee, Inc. "Development Plan, January 15, 1983." San Diego, California.

"Tail spinning," Sunset (July 1976), pp. 70-71.

"Those Roller Rides in the Sky," Time (July 4, 1977), pp. 36-37.

Verbal Boundary Description

Beginning at a point at the northeast corner of the Belmont Amusement Park property, on the southwest corner of Mission Blvd. and Ventura Place, proceed south approximately 600 feet to a point along the eastern property line. Then turn to the west and proceed 200 feet due west, then turn to the north and proceed due north 600 feet to a point on the northern property line of the amusement park on the southern side of Ventura Place. Then turn to the east and proceed along the northern property line back to the point of beginning.



BENT TRANSITION SUMMARY		
Bent No	C.C. Width Inside Run	C.C. Width Outside Run
16	80	80
17	90	80
18	85	88
19-35	90	90
36	90	88
37	90	86
38	90	85
39	90	80
40	86	80
41	83	80
42	81	80
43	80	80

BENT TRANSITION SUMMARY		
Bent No	C.C. Width Inside Run	C.C. Width Outside Run
11	80	80
12	85	85
13	85	85
14	88	88
15	90	90
16	87	87
100	84	84
101	80	80

NOTES

1. Typical bent width is 80 feet except as noted in Bent Transition Summary
2. Left hill approach run from bent no 150 to bent no 112 is in below grade. Alternate walled channels - see detail Sheet 7. Track through this section is supported by concrete and/or redwood piers buried in beach sand. Berms shown along this section support overhead trackage and/or serve as tunnel framing members.
3. All bent widening is toward inside of curve. Outermost uprights remain at 400 feet from Layout Line.

BENT PLAN
Scale 1/16"=1'-0"

Horizontal cross-section plan of the Mission Beach Roller Coaster. (Save the Coaster Committee, 1984)