

**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 Atlantic City Convention Hall

and or common

2. Location

street & number Georgia and Mississippi Avenues and the Boardwalk — not for publication

city, town Atlantic City — vicinity of

state New Jersey code county Atlantic code

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> public	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input type="checkbox"/> commercial
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> educational
<input type="checkbox"/> site	Public Acquisition	Accessible	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> entertainment
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial
		<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military
			<input type="checkbox"/> museum
			<input type="checkbox"/> park
			<input type="checkbox"/> private residence
			<input type="checkbox"/> religious
			<input type="checkbox"/> scientific
			<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> other: Recreation

4. Owner of Property

(pageantry, sports)

name Atlantic City Convention Center Authority (Mr. Thomas J. Sykes, Chairman)

street & number 2301 Boardwalk

city, town Atlantic City — vicinity of state New Jersey 08401

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Clerk of Records of Atlantic County

street & number Atlantic County Municipal Building

city, town Mays Landing state New Jersey

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title Atlantic City, Historic Buildings Survey has this property been determined eligible? yes no

date 1980 federal state county local

depository for survey records Office of Historic Preservation

city, town Trenton state New Jersey 08625

7. Description

Condition

excellent
 good
 fair

deteriorated
 ruins
 unexposed

Check one

unaltered
 altered

Check one

original site
 moved date _____

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

Summary

The Atlantic City Convention Hall, a vast 650-foot by 350-foot structure built in 1926-29, provides a dramatic focus on the Boardwalk at a significant bend in the beachfront.¹ It draws attention partly because of the great curving limestone exedra that curves out toward the beach and emphasizes the entrance of the Hall. Within, behind the massive pylons of the entrance, looms the great arched volume of the auditorium. Thus, the building really exists in two parts, unified by materials, function, and scale: the exedra with the covered curving double row of columns terminated by public bath houses, and the 2-story, limestone-clad front block of Convention Hall, backed by the immense brick-clad arched volume of the main hall. The main building contains the Great Hall, or Auditorium, large ballroom, and smaller public rooms.

Detailed Description

The exedra and public facade of the hall are both constructed in cut limestone. Their detail draws on the then-popular Lombard Romanesque, with elements of Neo-Assyrian design, especially in the capitals of the main arcade. That fusion of architectural styles no doubt occurred because both styles were being rediscovered by historians in the 1920s. The "First Romanesque Style" was the subject of volumes by Arthur Kingsley Porter and the Spaniard Puig y Chadafach, while the Assyrian archeological finds made by the British Museum were much noted in the popular press.

The Boardwalk-beach edge is appropriately ocean-oriented, with decoration, like that of contemporary Atlantic City hotels, using forms of ocean flora and fauna. Stone seahorses, porpoises, shells, and crustaceans are set into panels on the upper surfaces. The architectural forms are somewhat Mediterranean, with tile roofs, shallow corbels, and stylized Ravennate basket capitals similar to Italian 9th- and 10th-century Romanesque. At the corners of the site, just beyond the east and west walls of the facade, are public bath houses, small 3 x 5 bay rectangular limestone-clad buildings which are narrower on the north and south fronts. Shallow relief panels are set above their lintels, while corbel tables and tile roof edges crown their walls.

A short gap along the edge of the Boardwalk separates the rest rooms from the cubic baldachini that terminate the exedra. The latter are great piers that terminate the upper facade of the hall, bringing its overwhelming scale down onto the beachfront. Four square stone shafts carry an entablature that is capped by a series of stepped flat plates of stone. From the baldachini, the exedra curves out toward the ocean, then back toward the Boardwalk. It continues the entablature at the same level while the interior is clad with Gustavino tile; these are the same materials originally used in the vaulted entrance of the hall.

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	X engineering	music	humanitarian
1800-1899	commerce	exploration settlement	philosophy	theater
X 1900-	communications	industry	politics government	transportation
		invention		X other (specify)
				Recreation
				(pageantry)

Specific dates 1926-1929; 1964 **Builder Architect** Lockwood-Greene and Co.

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

Summary

Atlantic City introduced a number of elements to American seaside amusements before beauty pageants, including the Boardwalk (1870), the amusement pier (1882), the rolling chair (1884), and the American picture postcard (imported from Germany) (1895). Even in the first decades of the 20th century, it also featured fine hotels.¹

The present Boardwalk is concrete. All of the storied amusement piers have been destroyed or modified beyond recognition. The leading hotels from early in the century have been demolished. Only one major edifice remains that recalls the city's heyday as a seaside resort: the Atlantic City Convention Hall. This structure is also the scene of one of America's greatest pageants, the Miss America Contest.

The Atlantic City Convention Hall is the largest structure on the Atlantic City Boardwalk.² Its construction in 1926 marked the coming of age of "The World's Play Ground," as the nation's most popular resort dubbed itself; it culminated a half-century of development that created the Boardwalk, lined with great hotels. The city became the center of many of America's most popular folk events, beginning with the Easter Parade, and crowned in the 1920s with the public relations coup of the Miss America Pageant. More than half a century after its completion by architects Lockwood and Greene, the Hall continues to serve its original use as a convention center. It is also of interest for its size and engineering.

As engineering, the Atlantic City Convention Hall occupies a significant place in the history of large-span structures. Indeed, when it was built, it contained the largest room with an unobstructed view in the history of architecture. That feat was accomplished by the use of an architectural form developed for railroad train sheds, the three-hinged arched truss. The form had already been used for a similar exhibition purpose, in the Hall of Machinery of the Paris Exhibition of 1888, but it had not been used in a public auditorium. The engineering triumph of building so vast a hall on the seashore site resulted, on its 50th anniversary, in its being the recipient of the Civil Engineering Landmark designation of the American Society of Civil Engineers.

Atlantic City Convention Hall is also highly regarded by connoisseurs of American pipe organs, for it features what is, arguably, the largest organ in the world, with 33,000 pipes, arranged in chambers built into the walls of the Great Hall.³

9. Major Bibliographical References

SEE CONTINUATION SHEET

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of nominated property 4 acres

Quadrangle name Atlantic City

Quadrangle scale 1:24,000

UTM References

A

1	8	5	4	8	3	6	0	4	3	5	5	9	7	0
Zone		Easting				Northing								

B

1	8	5	4	8	2	6	0	4	3	5	6	1	5	0
Zone		Easting				Northing								

C

1	8	5	4	8	3	6	0	4	3	5	6	2	0	0
Zone		Easting				Northing								

D

1	8	5	4	8	4	5	0	4	3	5	6	0	2	0
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, Historian

organization History Division, National Park Service date June 17, 1985

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

city or town Washington state DC 20013-7127

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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The front of the Convention Hall follows a Beaux Arts monumental scheme, again with Lombard Romanesque detail. A multi-story arcade above the broad Boardwalk entrance is flanked by tall pylons. The lower 3-story-high blocks, flanking the main block, contain shops on the first floor and offices and conference rooms on the second and third. The stone is coursed in regular, alternating wide and narrow bands, of a sort associated with Neo-Romanesque style in the 1890s. Pronounced variations in the color and tone of the limestone form an overall pattern.

The Beaux Arts rhythm, of lower end wings, terminating towers, and central arcade block, contrasts with the secondary patterns of Lombard Romanesque, in a smaller decorative scale. A corbel table supporting a string course sets off the openings of the first floor from the fenestrated and arcaded second floor; it is repeated again below the tile roof edge across the upper levels. Heraldic shields of the State of New Jersey are flanked by porpoises and seahorses above the doors in the towers and over the broad Boardwalk entrance, while a great frieze of sea fauna caps the towers.

This facade remains essentially intact, although the original architects modified it at the time of the Democratic National Convention in 1964. They walled in the large window openings of the second-floor gallery and removed the store fronts to the sides of the main entrance, as well as the doors in the towers. The original Boardwalk entrance was also modernized. Grained marble column covers and blue tile were placed on the wall, below a new stainless steel canopy, leading into a modernized foyer.

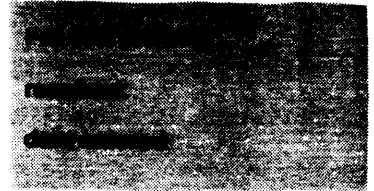
Behind the cut-stone front block, the main bulk of the building is sheathed in variegated yellow brick laid in decorative patterns, panels, and diaperwork. Massive piers along Georgia and Mississippi Avenues mark the great structural arches of the interior. Blind arcades along the side again recall the Lombard Romanesque. Bullseye windows and corbel tables fill the walls below the tiles of the roof edge, and limestone continues the color of the front on the upper surfaces of spur buttresses on the pier caps along the sides.

The same large rhythm of piers, infilled with brick wall panels, marks the north, or stage house, end. There the tall central volume, flanked by lower side wings, recalls the front composition. The street level is again detailed with limestone pier caps. Light-toned brick with limestone-colored concrete piers was carried on to the west wall.

The vestibule that connected the Hall to the Boardwalk was designed to be an immense vaulted passageway 50 feet wide, linking the beach and the Convention Hall and of sufficient size to permit the floats of Boardwalk pageants to be driven directly into the Auditorium for judges to view. It was sheathed in limestone, with a shallow Gustavino tile vault (resembling the outdoor exedra). The vestibule led to great sloping ramps to the upper levels and the front Ballroom and, through a low entrance, to the Great Hall itself. This vestibule was also modified in 1964.

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The front Ballroom occupies a space behind the front loggia, or promenade, which is 12 feet wide by 185 feet long. Its axis runs across that of the main building to form a rectangular room 185 feet by 130 feet. A coved cornice leads to a central border, containing lights and speakers, that sets off a central flat panel raised above ventilation grills. The central panel is richly painted with clouds opening around square gold panels containing the signs of the zodiac, from which reach golden rays from the sun in the center. An organ balcony on the north wall, framed by three large arches, rests on capitals carved with seahorses. Though altered by new paint colors, stainless steel doors on the north side, and closed off from the balcony, the room remains an important Art Deco space. (Its original character is being restored.)

The extraordinary Great Hall is still one of the world's largest interior spaces, more than half a century after its completion. Its great roof gives the building its characteristic shape. It takes its form from the ten pairs of immense three-hinged arch roof trusses spanning its full 350-foot width. They recall the shape of the great railroad train sheds on which they were modelled. The result is a room 300 feet wide by 480 feet long, seating 30,000 on the floor, and surrounded on three sides by a mezzanine that seats another 10,000.

The Great Hall focuses on a handsome proscenium arch, flanked by eagle-capped pilasters. They frame the stage, which is alone 110 feet wide and 85 feet deep, at the north end of the building. The room survives nearly intact, with its original Art Deco decorative schemes still visible. Instead of primary tones, Lockwood and Greene used a color scheme based on secondary tones: sea foam green on the pilasters, accented by bright blue trim which continues along the triple arches of the side arcades. There, the emblems of all the States emphasize the theme of Atlantic City as a national resort. The whole space is covered by the massive steel arches, which are infilled with a continuous web covered by an early attempt at acoustic sound-absorbent material, painted a dull silver that sheds a metallic gleam.

The pipe organ of the Great Hall contains some 33,000 pipes in 8 chambers. These are placed:

one on either side of the stage in the same plane, separated by 175 feet, two spaced along each side wall between the seating gallery and the ceiling vault, and two high in the ceiling itself, close to the middle of the auditorium. It is as if the listener were inside the instrument, surrounded by sound which not only issues from two positions in every quadrant for anyone stationed forward of the middle chambers, but echoes and reverberates from everywhere else. Even visually, it is not an "object." One sees only grills flush with the room surfaces; there are no display pipes.²

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The ancillary spaces off the Great Hall are almost plain by contrast to it; imitation red granite wainscotting, set off by dark borders, accents the long ramps to the mezzanine and the upstairs corridors. The walls and ceilings in the corridors, small conference rooms, and dressing rooms are painted plaster. Stairwells that lead to the side exits on the major axes follow the detail of the public areas, with the imitation granite wainscotting. The metalwork is painted the dull silver of the main hall.

In general, the Convention Hall is in excellent condition, with alterations only minimally detracting from the great structure. The principal changes have occurred on the sides, where recent construction has obscured much of the side walls. In 1964, the original architects, Lockwood and Greene, were called back to erect a large, single-story, columned exhibition hall connected by doors and an escalator to the major levels of the Convention Hall. Its exterior of concrete and block construction recalls the monumental scale of the original building, but in different materials. Though it serves an allied purpose and functions together with the original hall as one of the East Coast's premier convention facilities, the new hall is separated by deed. (Only the original hall and exedra are included in this nomination.)

While the new hall is adjacent to the original hall, it only conceals the lower portion of the west side, leaving the hall's two major facades intact. More recently, the Trump Casino has been constructed abutting the east wall of Convention Hall.

A major restoration and rehabilitation of the Convention Hall began in 1983, and should be complete in 1985.³ The Great Hall and Grand Ballroom are being carefully restored; the entrances from the ballroom onto the loggia will be reopened, as will the arcaded shopping area beneath it. A new main lobby will replace the vestibule area modified in 1964.

Footnotes

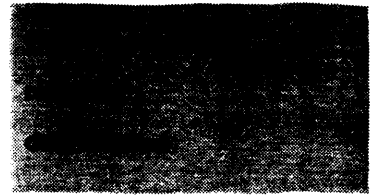
¹This description is an edited and condensed version of the description contained in the draft National Register of Historic Places nomination form, prepared by Dr. George E. Thomas of the Clio Group, Inc., for the Atlantic City Convention Center Authority in 1983.

²David Fuller, "Atlantic City and the Ideal Organ," The American Organist, 19, 11 (November 1985), p. 74.

³Atlantic City Convention Center Authority, "Atlantic City Convention Center, the Second Renaissance Begins" (Atlantic City: Atlantic City Convention Center Authority, 1985), unpaginated. (Pamphlet.)

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History

The Atlantic City Convention Hall opened in 1929, on the 75th anniversary of the founding, by the directors of the Pennsylvania Railroad, of the city, which began as a speculative resort on Absecon Island. The role of the building in local history is clear from its position on the Boardwalk, the seaside boulevard that set Atlantic City apart from other American cities, and near the railroad stations, built by the capitalists who established the community.

The building was first proposed in 1926 when the Atlantic City beachfront was at its peak of popularity. In that year, architects Lockwood and Greene of Boston and New York were selected to design it because of their experience with long-span structures. They were charged by Mayor Edward Bader to build "the world's largest auditorium," as befitting "The World's Play Ground." When completed in 1929, the Hall was the world's largest auditorium and had the largest permanent span 3-hinged roof arch system ever built.

The Great Hall of the Convention Center was multi-purpose from the start. It has been transformed alternately into an ice-skating rink, a football gridiron, a polo and horse-show field and a steeplechase course; the ice-skating rink (90 feet by 200 feet) and one of the world's largest pipe organs were built into the structure.

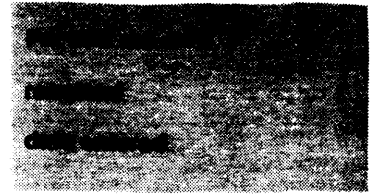
The Hall was dedicated on the traditional weekend of the opening of the summer season, on May 31, 1929, exactly 75 years after the first train steamed into newly laid out Atlantic City. The event was attended by luminaries who included the Vice President of the United States Charles F. Curtis and the Ambassadors of the United Kingdom and Spain.

Atlantic City Convention Hall still holds national interest as the site of the typically American and much copied beauty pageant, the "Miss America" Contest. Though Bert Parks and the song "Here She Comes, Miss America" are part of the past, the Convention Hall has, since its completion, been the traditional scene of the event, now more than 60 years old. The first pageant was held in 1921; the following year that great recorder of Americana, Norman Rockwell, was one of the judges. By the early 1930s, the event had been invested with such significance by the media that Mayor Charles White boasted: "This is a cultural event seeking a high type of beauty. Atlantic City has a keen interest in the way of art, beauty and culture."

The hall has also been used for other nationally important events. For example, the Democratic National Convention of 1964, at which Lyndon B. Johnson and Hubert H. Humphrey were nominated for President and Vice President, respectively, was held there. The hall continues as one of the Nation's principal convention centers. That position has been enhanced in the 1980s, as Atlantic City's casino boom has brought revived prosperity to the city.

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Architecture

In architecture, for its era, the facade is up to date in adapting historical styles then being revived. It is primarily Lombardic Romanesque with overtones of the Assyrian Revival, which was, around the same time, being adapted in the Nebraska State Capitol and the Los Angeles County Library. These styles were overlaid on a Beaux Arts Classical facade then common in civic design. The gigantic inscriptions marking this as a place for cultural events--"EDUCATION, SCIENCE, CONVENTIONS, ART, INDUSTRY" on the right tower, and, on the left, "FESTIVITIES, MUSIC, PAGEANTRY, DRAMA, ATHLETICS"--are also firmly in the Beaux Arts tradition.

Engineering

The Convention Hall is also a tribute to the talents of the designers, Lockwood-Greene & Co., who are important in the history of American architecture and engineering. The firm is one of the oldest active in America, having been formed in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1833. It long specialized in long-span mill spaces. By 1900 it had shifted into purely architectural and engineering work and its services were much sought after. Raymond Hood used the firm as engineers for the super span spaces of the McGraw-Hill Building in New York City. Auditoriums up and down the East Coast were designed by the office, although the Atlantic City Convention Hall is almost certainly the most important. Once the firm was established in Atlantic City, it was responsible for several other important commissions along the Boardwalk, including the Boardwalk National Bank Arcade (now the First National Bank of New Jersey) and the Seaside Hotel.

Footnotes

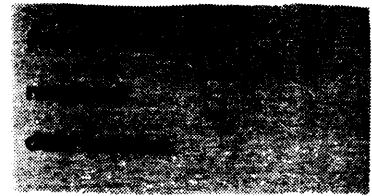
¹Works Progress Administration, "Atlantic City," New Jersey, A Guide to Its Present and Past (New York: Viking Press, 1939), pp. 195-98.

²This statement of significance is, for the most part, edited and condensed from the draft National Register of Historic Places nomination form, prepared by Dr. George E. Thomas of the Clio Group, Inc., for the Atlantic City Convention Center Authority in 1983.

³See discussion in the article by David Fuller cited in Note 2 of the Description.

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- "Huge Civic Auditorium Opened at Atlantic City," The American City, 41, 145 (July 1929), pp. 216-220.
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- Works Progress Administration. New Jersey, A Guide to Its Present and Past. New York: Viking Press, 1939.
- "World's Largest Hall Seats 40,000 People," Scientific American, 140 (February 1929).

VERBAL BOUNDARY

The Convention Hall site is bounded by a rectangle beginning at a point where Georgia Avenue intersects the Boardwalk, continuing 645 feet along Georgia Avenue to a perpendicular intersection with Pacific Avenue; then along Pacific 347 feet to Mississippi Avenue, then returning at a 90 degree angle along Mississippi 675 feet to the Boardwalk; at that point returning 349 feet to the originating point at Mississippi and the Boardwalk. The entire site, consisting of Lots 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, and 18 in Block 42 of the Tax Map of Atlantic City, is occupied by Convention Hall.

