

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

For NPS use only

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

received FEB 22 1985  
date entered

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

**1. Name**

historic Chester H. Thordarson Estate TP

and/or common Historic Structures of the Thordarson Estate

**2. Location**

street & number Rock Island State Park \_\_\_\_\_ not for publication

city, town Washington Island  vicinity of

state Wisconsin code 55 county Door code 029

**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 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	<b>Public Acquisition</b>	<b>Accessible</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Thematic Group	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> N.A.	<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military
			<input type="checkbox"/> museum
			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> park
			<input type="checkbox"/> private residence
			<input type="checkbox"/> religious
			<input type="checkbox"/> scientific
			<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
			<input type="checkbox"/> other:

**4. Owner of Property**

name Department of Natural Resources, Bureau of Parks and Recreation

street & number 101 S. Webster St.

city, town Madison \_\_\_\_\_ vicinity of state WI

**5. Location of Legal Description**

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Register of Deeds, Door County Courthouse

street & number 138 S. 4th St.

city, town Sturgeon Bay state WI 54235

**6. Representation in Existing Surveys**

title WI Inventory of Historic Places has this property been determined eligible?  yes  no

date 1975 \_\_\_\_\_ federal  state \_\_\_\_\_ county \_\_\_\_\_ local

depository for survey records Historic Preservation Division, State Historical Society

city, town Madison state WI

## 7. Description

<b>Condition</b>		<b>Check one</b>	<b>Check one</b>
<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

#### GENERAL DESCRIPTION

The Historic Structures of the Thordarson Estate are 13 buildings and structures located on Rock Island, a small island at the tip of Wisconsin's Door County Peninsula. Except for two of the buildings, they are all original buildings erected for Chester H. Thordarson, a Chicago electrical inventor and businessman. The nomination is divided into two parts; the Thordarson Estate Historic District, located on the southwest corner of the island, and an individual building located across the island from the district.

The Thordarson Estate (now Rock Island State Park) takes up the majority of the well-wooded island. The 777-acre estate was a retreat and nature preserve for Thordarson. Most of the extant buildings were constructed during the 1920s, particularly the stone buildings. While there is no documentary evidence to prove it, it is thought that Thordarson was attempting to create a "romantic" replica of his native Iceland in the design of the stone buildings of the estate. Thordarson was also intent on building on a grand scale, with multiple buildings for individual purposes as well as grand structures, such as the Boathouse-Casino.

All the original Thordarson Estate buildings have a continuity of design and method of construction, giving the estate cohesion, even though the buildings are not spaced close together. The stone buildings are relatively simple, utilitarian structures, but their solid stone walls and heavy tile roofs exhibit a high quality of construction materials and workmanship. The frame buildings which contribute to the historic district are also very similar in their construction materials and design.

The island is only reached by boat, effectively separating the estate from any other built environment. The Potawatomi Light House (NRHP:1979) on the northern end of the island, part of the 130-acre U.S. Government reserve, is the only other significant building on the island.

#### SURVEY METHODOLOGY

This nomination is based on an intensive historical and architectural survey done in the summer and fall of 1984 by staff members of the Historic Preservation Division of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. National Register criteria was used to determine the eligibility of the buildings and structures of the island.

# 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 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 type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-1935	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify)
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		

**Specific dates** 1910-1935 **Builder/Architect** Frederick P. Dinkelberg<sup>1</sup>

**Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)**

The Historic Structures of the Thordarson Estate are significant for architecture because they exhibit a high and unusual quality, type and method of construction uncommon in Wisconsin after the turn of the century. After an historic overview of the Thordarson Estate, this theme will be developed in detail, followed by a statement of significance for the historic district.

**HISTORIC OVERVIEW OF THE THORDARSON ESTATE**

Rock Island, sitting at the tip of the Door County Peninsula was probably one of the early places in Wisconsin visited by white explorers. By 1835 or 36, settlers began a fishing village on the eastern shore of the island. A group of Chippewa Indians also were reported living on the island during this time. Very quickly, however, the fishing village declined, and during the 1850s and 1860s, people left the island. By the turn of the century, the island was virtually uninhabited.<sup>2</sup>

In 1910, Chester Hjortur Thordarson, a Chicago electrical inventor and businessman, began purchasing the private parcels on the island. By 1912, he had accumulated all the land on the island, save the U.S. Government reserve. He planned originally to keep the island as a forest preserve, but by the 1920s, he also was using the island as a vacation retreat.<sup>3</sup>

As a boy, Thordarson lived briefly in Wisconsin after his family immigrated from Iceland in 1873. While the family may have been aware that there was an Icelandic community on Washington Island during this time, the family lived in Milwaukee, Dane County, and Shawano County before moving to North Dakota in 1880. Thordarson's knowledge of Wisconsin and the Icelandic community on the Door County Peninsula may have been a factor in his establishment of an estate on Rock Island.

In 1885, Thordarson left North Dakota for Chicago, where he completed formal schooling through the seventh grade. He then found work in an electrical shop in Chicago and stayed in that position until 1889. Between 1889 and 1891, Thordarson worked in St. Louis in a plant which manufactured electric motors for streetcars. He moved back and forth from St. Louis to Chicago two times, working for various electrical manufacturing companies. He settled permanently in Chicago in 1892, where he worked in the electrical repair shop of the Edison Company. In 1895, Thordarson began his own business in electrical repair, and for three years had an exclusive repair contract with the Western Electric Company. At this time, Thordarson began experimenting with his own electrical designs and in 1904, he invested the first 1,000,000 volt transformer. He exhibited this invention at the 1904 St. Louis Fair, where he won a gold medal and notoriety in the electrical field. He exhibited a second 1,000,000 volt transformer at the San Francisco International Panama-Pacific Exposition in 1915. The transformer had little practical use at the time, but it did establish Thordarson's reputation as a man who was innovative and willing to take on any challenge. This reputation led to Thordarson's success with his company, the Thordarson Electric Manufacturing

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Company, which specialized in electrical equipment to order and other experimental laboratory equipment. The company was particularly successful as a supplier of laboratory equipment to schools and universities. The company made Thordarson a wealthy man; by 1929, his company employed 1500 people and owned the patents on 115 electrical inventions. The Thordarson Electrical Manufacturing Company declined during the Depression, but was still in operation at the time of Thordarson's death in 1945, then occupied with government work for the war.

It was during Thordarson's most successful period, the late 1920s that he built many of the buildings on Rock Island comprising the historic district. Previous to this time, he kept the island mainly as a nature preserve and small retreat. During the late 1920s, Thordarson significantly expanded the number of buildings of the estate, creating a retreat befitting a successful and wealthy businessman.

While Thordarson lived in Chicago, he amassed a significant rare book collection, particularly in the areas of natural science and engineering. And, he cultivated the friendship of leading Chicagoans such as Mayor William Hale "Big Bill" Thompson, for whom he built a cabin on Rock Island in the 1920s (no longer extant). During the 1930s and early 1940s, Thordarson began spending more time on Rock Island, and in 1942, he moved his rare book collection to the boathouse-casino there. At the time of his death in 1945, Thordarson had collected 11,000 rare books, and was actively negotiating for the sale of the collection to the University of Wisconsin. In 1946, the University did, indeed, purchase the collection, which, because of its significance, set a precedent for the acquisition of additional works in the humanities, and especially the sciences. The Thordarson rare book collection also virtually established the rare books department at the University of Wisconsin library, and because the collection was so significant in the area of science, the library has become one of the major centers in the country for research in the history of science.<sup>5</sup>

Thordarson's heirs retained ownership of the island until 1964, when they sold it to the State of Wisconsin. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources established Rock Island State Park shortly after the sale, and has maintained the park as a semi-wilderness area up to the present time. Unfortunately, park personnel demolished some of the buildings and structures of the original Thordarson Estate, but the buildings which remain clearly illustrate Thordarson's commitment both to the island, and to his vision of a "wilderness" retreat.

**ARCHITECTURE**

The most significant buildings and structures of the Thordarson Estate -- the stone buildings--are a good example of nineteenth century stone construction methods executed in the twentieth century, assisted by twentieth century engineering. These buildings and structures were built for a man who was probably attempting to create a "romantic" replica of an Icelandic settlement. The stone buildings and structures possess a high quality of construction and materials, and today, possess a high degree of integrity. They are a cohesive, though widely spaced, group existing as an entity on an island surrounded by the water on one side, and the woods on the other. Only the stone water tower is physically separated from the rest of the buildings, yet,

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its similarity in type and method of construction to the buildings in the historic district makes the water tower significant as well. The use of rough, locally-quarried limestone for so many of the estate's buildings is somewhat unusual after the turn of the century, when frame and brick construction was easier and, no doubt, cheaper. That Thordarson requested this type of construction indicates that he was making a definite architectural statement. An examination of the details of the buildings and structures of the estate will document the significance of the estate as a whole.

The boathouse-casino has been called a replica of Iceland's parliament building, the Althing. The window style and arches are similar to those of the Althing, however, it is probable that Thordarson drew not only from his boyhood memories of Iceland, but also from his attitude of what an estate of a wealthy American should be, along with his love of nature and the natural beauty of Rock Island, when he had the stone buildings and structures designed and built. Whatever the reasons, the materials, workmanship, and design of the boathouse-casino is of high quality and unusual. The irregularly and regularly coursed limestone construction of the boathouse-casino is carried over into the pavilion, the walls and gate, and the water tower. The red tile, simple gable roof is also a detail which is repeated in most of the estate's buildings. The overhanging roofs are also apparent in all the buildings, along with exposed rafter ends, even in the frame buildings.

While there are many similarities to the stone buildings of the district, there are also variations. The greenhouse building is not constructed of limestone, but of cobblestones. However, the cobblestones are similar in color to the limestone, complementing the other buildings of the estate. Cobblestones are also used in the gate, and they are the same type as in the greenhouse building. The green tile roof of the greenhouse is different only in color from the other stone buildings of the estate. The guest house and reservoir also vary slightly from the others because their stones are laid in a more rubble-like manner, which results in a "rougher" appearance. However, the entrance facade of the guest house is a smaller scale replica of the openings of the boathouse-casino. The pantry stones are more of a mixture of shapes and sizes than in the other buildings, but are finished so that they appear to be smoother.

That the stone buildings have so many similarities may be due to a similar designer and builder(s). Only two of the buildings can be documented as designed by the architect, Frederick Dinkelberg, who while working for D. H. Burnham, participated in some of that firm's significant works such as the Flatiron Building in New York City.<sup>6</sup> But, whether Dinkelberg designed all the buildings, a clear attempt was made to make the buildings similar, and since Thordarson used local labor for construction, probably the same masons and builders worked on almost all of the buildings.

The frame buildings, while not as elaborate as the stone buildings, have a high degree of integrity. Except for the park workshop, they have identical siding and roofs. Most of their original details are there, and even though the park workshop has lost some integrity, its stone foundation and simple design, ties it in with the other buildings in the district.

Because of the high quality of materials, construction techniques, and the unusual type of construction of the stone buildings of the original estate, the Historic Structures of the Thordarson Estate are significant. The level of preservation (now that buildings are not being demolished) and integrity is high, and it is a landmark in northeastern Wisconsin. It stands as an example of one man's vision of a retreat, a vision rooted in his boyhood culture and appreciation for nature.

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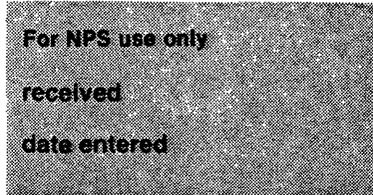
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Notes:

<sup>1</sup> F. P. Dinkelberg appears as the architect of two of the buildings of the district, according to the only **existing plans** of the estate. Correspondence found in the Thordarson Papers indicates that the water tower was probably designed by the architectural firm of Francis Willard Puckey and Austin Dickinson Jenkins, a firm of unknown significance.

<sup>2</sup> H. R. Holand, Old Peninsula Days. Ephraim, WI: Pioneer Publishing Company, 1925, pp. 66-84.

<sup>3</sup> Letter to Mr. Vroman Mason from Chester H. Thordarson, January 15, 1919. In Thordarson Papers, Archives Division, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin.

<sup>4</sup> Betty Cass, "Day by Day," Wisconsin State Journal, January 31, 1943, p. 12, cols. 1-4; Neil M. Clark, "The Flare of the Northern Lights Started Thordarson on his Quest," American Magazine, December, 1926, pp. 183-190; Dennis A. Hill, "Chester H. Thordarson--A Biographical Chronology," **Unpublished report** prepared for the Rare Books Department, University of Wisconsin Memorial Library, 1976, on file, Historic Preservation Division, State Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin; Pat Powell, "Chester Thordarson: Scientist and Bibliophile Extraordinaire," Wisconsin Academy Review, 1980, 26(4), pp. 38-40.

<sup>5</sup> Letter to Mr. William Hale Thompson from Chester H. Thordarson, December 5, 1924. In Thordarson Papers, Archives Division, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin; Powell, p. 40; John Neu, "The Acquisition of the Thordarson Collection," University of Wisconsin Library News, 1966, 11(3), pp. 1-6.

<sup>6</sup> Henry F. Withey, A.I.A. and Elsie Rathburn Withey, Biographical Dictionary of American Architects (Deceased). Los Angeles: Hennessey & Ingalls, Inc., 1970, pp. 174-175. Also, plans for the guest house signed and dated 1926 by Frederick P. Dinkelberg, are in the possession of park personnel at Rock Island State Park.

**BOUNDARY OF THORDARSON ESTATE HISTORIC DISTRICT**

The boundary of the Thordarson Estate Historic District is as follows: Beginning at the water's edge approximately 50 feet southwest of the park workshop following a line east until it intersects with a north-south line running approximately 100 feet east of the rest room, then running along this line until it intersects with an east-west line running approximately 50 feet north of the reservoir, then running along this line until reaching the water's edge. The western shoreline is the boundary line of the western edge of the district. This boundary encloses approximately 15 acres.

**JUSTIFICATION OF BOUNDARY**

This boundary includes the significant buildings and structures of the original Thordarson Estate while excluding as much additional acreage as possible.

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**SIGNIFICANCE OF THE THORDARSON ESTATE HISTORIC DISTRICT**

The Thordarson Estate Historic District is significant because it contains within its boundaries significant stone and frame buildings which together represent Chester Thordarson's vision of an estate steeped in the culture of his homeland--Iceland. The stone buildings, particularly, possess a high quality type and method of construction, as well as a similarity of design and workmanship. The stone structures of the estate; the pavilion, the gate, and the wall also possess this high quality type and method of construction. It is apparent that Thordarson, in the 1920s, was attempting to build a showplace estate, perhaps eventually eliminating the frame and log buildings in favor of all stone structures. For example, on the drawing board but never constructed, was a large stone lodge which would have been similar to the boat-house-casino, but larger with a pagoda style roof. In any event, the group of buildings and structures in the Thordarson Estate Historic District are architectural landmarks because of their unusual design and construction. The district possesses a high level of integrity and preservation. In fact, even though some historic log and frame buildings were demolished by the park personnel during the 1960s, they have made an effort, sometimes at great expense, to maintain the remaining buildings and to construct any new buildings in a style which blends in with the historic buildings and structures of the district. The result is that the district is an architectural landmark in the area, representing one man's vision of his own self-importance and his view of his island retreat.

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ARCHEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE

The Rock Island Historic District (NRHP:1972), an archeological district consisting of potential resources from both pre-historic Indian and historic Indian and French settlement, is a known resource. The boundaries of this district do not coincide or overlap any of the Thordarson Estate Historic District boundaries. There is much evidence to suggest that other archeological resources exist on the island, the fishing community and the demolished buildings of the original Thordarson Estate, for example. These have not yet been explored or tested, but the potential for further archeological significance is great.

ITEM 9: MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Cass, Betty. "Day by Day!" Wisconsin State Journal, January 31, 1943, p. 12, cols. 1-4.

Clark, Neil M. "The Flare of the Northern Lights Started Thordarson on his Quest." American Magazine, December, 1926.

Dinkelberg, F. P. entry. Files of the Board of Examiners of Architects of Wisconsin. Archives Division, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin.

Hagedorn, Ralph. "Bibliogheca Thordarsoniana: The Sequel." Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America, Vol. 44, First Quarter, 1950.

Hill, Dennis A. "Chester H. Thordarson--A Biographical Chronology." Unpublished report prepared for the Rare Books Department, University of Wisconsin Memorial Library, 1976, on file, Historic Preservation Division, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin.

Holand, H. R. Old Peninsula Days. Ephraim, WI: Pioneer Publishing Company, 1925.

Neu, John. "The Acquisition of the Thordarson Collection." University of Wisconsin Library News, 1966, 11(3), pp. 1-6.

Powell, Pat. "Chester Thordarson: Scientist and Bibliophile Extraordinaire." Wisconsin Academy Review, 1980, 26(4); pp. 38-40.

Thordarson Papers. Archives Division, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin.

Withey, Henry F. and Elsie Rathburn Withey. Biographical Dictionary of American Architects (Deceased). Los Angeles: Hennessey & Ingalls, Inc., 1970.

# 9. Major Bibliographical References

see continuation pages

# 10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of nominated property approximately 15

Quadrangle name Washington Island NE, Wis.-Mich.

Quadrangle scale 1:24,000

### UTM References

A	1 6	5 1 3 3 1 0	5 0 2 8 6 6 0	} DIST.	B	1 6	5 1 3 4 8 0	5 0 2 8 6 6 0	
	Zone	Easting	Northing				Zone	Easting	Northing
C	1 6	5 1 3 4 8 0	5 0 2 8 0 9 0			D	1 6	5 1 3 3 8 0	5 0 2 8 0 9 0
E	1 6	5 1 5 1 5 0	5 0 2 8 5 4 0			F			
G					H				

- WATER TOWER

### Verbal boundary description and justification

see continuation pages

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

state	code	county	code

# 11. Form Prepared By

name/title Carol Lohry Cartwright

organization Historic Preservation Division date 12/17/84

street & number 816 State St. telephone (608) 262-1339

city or town Madison state WI 53706

# 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 *[Signature]* date FEB. 5, 1985

title DIRECTOR OF HISTORIC PRESERVATION

For NPS use only

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

*[Signature]* date *[Signature]*

Keeper of the National Register

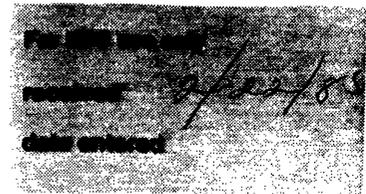
Attest:

date

Chief of Registration

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Multiple Resource Area  
Thematic Group

dnr-11

Name Chester H. Thordarson Estate Thematic Resources

State Door County, WISCONSIN

Conv 3/21/85

Nomination/Type of Review

Date/Signature

1. Thordarson Estate Historic District

Entered in the  
National Register

*for* Keeper

Attest

Helene Byen 3/21/85

2. Water Tower

Entered in the  
National Register

*for* Keeper

Attest

Helene Byen 3/21/85

3.

Keeper

Attest

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