

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

For NPS use only

National Register of Historic Places  
Inventory—Nomination Form

received MAY 16 1985  
date entered

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

1. Name

historic N/A

and/or common Speculative Commercial Blocks of Superior's Boom Period 1888-1892 TR

2. Location

street & number Various - see individual ISF notations not for publication

city, town Superior vicinity of

state Wisconsin code 55 county Douglas code 031

3. Classification

<b>Category</b>	<b>Ownership</b>	<b>Status</b>	<b>Present Use</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input type="checkbox"/> public	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture
<input type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input checked="" 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 type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government
<input type="checkbox"/> Thematic	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Group	N/A	<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 type="checkbox"/> other:

4. Owner of Property

name Various - see individual ISF notations

street & number

city, town vicinity of state

5. Location of Legal Description

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

street & number 1313 Belknap Avenue

city, town Superior state WI 54880

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

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

date 1983 federal  state county local

depository for survey records State Historical Society of Wisconsin

city, town Madison state WI 53706

# 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

#### INTRODUCTION

The theme Speculative Commercial Blocks of Superior's Boom Period 1888-1892 was defined in order to identify and nominate all those eligible properties within the central business districts of the city of Superior which are characteristic of the expansive speculative commercial construction which occurred in the community during its most explosive period of growth in the late nineteenth century. The resources detailed in this nomination represent a unique historical and architectural grouping of commercial buildings in the city, each a response to a single, specific developmental phase within the history of the community. Each site is representative of the incredible speculative interest and investment that would bring the small, isolated community of Superior from a strongly rural background in the mid-1800s into position as a major center of trade and commerce in the upper Midwest by the late 1880s and 1890s. This boom period investment represented a construction and developmental tide never to be matched in scale or aesthetic level again in the lake Superior port city.

#### Location and Setting

Located in northwestern Douglas county, along the border with Minnesota, Superior lies directly across the St. Louis River from its sister-city of Duluth, MN. Located on the western shore of Lake Superior, Superior is the farthest inland of the Great Lakes major port cities. The combined Superior-Duluth harbor was among one of the nation's most significant and productive Great Lakes ports during the late 19th and early 20th centuries; with access to eastern markets and the great, expansive wheat-producing areas of the upper Midwest and Canada. Still serving as a commercial center for upper Douglas County and the far northwestern part of the state, Superior lies generally on a flat plain of land surrounded on three sides by Superior Bay, St. Louis Bay and the St. Louis River. The city is platted in an orderly grid of rectangular blocks with consistent alleyway access. The major commercial thoroughfare within the city is located along Tower Avenue, a wide, four-lane roadway stretching north to south from the industrial waterfront to the southern city limits (STH 35). Lined with commercial structures of one to four stories in height, Tower Avenue still serves as the center of trade and commerce for this community of 29,000. A smaller, locally important commercial district developed along East 5th St. in the eastern part of the city.

#### General Description

Superior is a city of diverse architectural styles, with stylistic interpretations ranging from mid-19th century Greek Revival to contemporary geodesic domes. The city's commercial structures also represent a broad spectrum of designs from the early 19th century vernacular to Moderne interpretations from the 1920s and 1930s. Upon viewing the major commercial areas of the city however, one is left with the strong impression of a late 19th century commercial community. A community of solid brick and stone structures designed in the picturesque styles and forms that marked the period. The 12 structures identified in this thematic nomination encompass the most dramatic of these stylistic interpretations, providing examples of the Romanesque Revival, Richardsonian Romanesque, Classical Revival and early Commercial styles of the late 1880s and 1890s. Representative of the city's best 19th century commercial designs, these solid, imposing designs were clearly built to relate to the outside world the newly arrived prosperity that marked

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

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

For NPS use only  
received  
date entered

Superior, WI

Continuation sheet Superior Commercial blocks      Item number 7      Page 1

the community. Each of the nominated buildings occupies a commanding corner site along one of the major thoroughfares within the commercial center of the community. The majority (nine) are centered along Tower Ave., the most significant historic business and commercial corridor. Substantial blocks of two, three and four stories, each building clearly dominates those smaller commercial buildings adjacent to it. In general, these structures also represent the oldest surviving structures located within the historic business center of the city. (Due to the early speculative nature of city development in Superior a unique paradox is found in the commercial core, in that the earliest buildings are in effect the largest downtown structures, while later buildings were generally of smaller, less ostentatious design.)

Generally of brick or masonry construction many of the structures feature rich brownstone and terra cotta detailing. Two buildings, the Old City Hall and the Berkshire block are massive stone masonry structures, each designed in the Richardsonian style. Exterior brick surfaces range from a predominant deep-red pressed brick to an imported cream-colored face brick. The buildings incorporate a variety of structural framing types, including brick exterior bearing walls with wood-framed interiors (New York, New Jersey, & Massachusetts Blocks); full masonry bearing wall designs (Trade & Commerce Building); and commercial steel and iron frame construction (Washington & Minnesota Blocks). Each property has a minimum ground floor area of approximately 8,000 square feet, the smallest Tower Ave. sites (the Massachusetts and Berkshire Blocks) containing a total of 24,000 to 25,000 square feet of useable commercial/office space, while the largest contains 62,000 sq. ft.. Generally designed as speculative office structures with ground floor commercial areas, a number of the structures were also designed with upper floors given over to well-appointed apartments and residential suites.

Styles

Of the sites identified in this nomination the largest number fall into the stylistic category of Victorian Romanesque Revival, a style noted in Superior for its polychromatic use of smooth red brick, rough-cut Lake Superior sandstone, and prominent round-headed arches along the upper floors of the main elevations. Boldly detailed examples of the style include the New York Block (1402 Tower Ave.); Massachusetts Block (1525 Tower Ave.); Empire Block (1202 Tower Ave.); Descent Block (502 22nd Ave E.); New Jersey Block (1424 Tower Ave.); and the Northern Block (2229 E 5th St.).

Two striking examples of the late 19th century Richardsonian Romanesque Revival style are found in the Trade & Commerce Building (916 Hammond Ave.) and the Berkshire Block (917 Tower Ave.). Both structures feature the rusticated stone exterior treatment and solid window and doorway massing that characterize the style as popularized by master architect H.H. Richardson.

Distinctive examples of the rich eclecticism which dominated the late 1800s can be found in the classic revival influenced designs of the Washington Block (1517 Tower Ave.), with its severe, sharpened-edged window details of carved terra cotta and Sullivan-esque-inspired baroque doorway; and the three story Wemyss Block (1301 Tower Ave.), which features a dominant upper story arcade of slender Ionic columns and decorative dentil and greek key friezes dividing floor levels.

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

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

For NPS use only

received

date entered

Superior, WI

Continuation sheet Superior Commercial Blocks Item number 7 Page 2

The last major stylistic treatment found within the nominated properties is actually an expression of the blending of past architectural traditions with then modern concepts of urban commercial design and building technology. The sizable Minnesota Block (1501 Tower Ave.) and the Maryland Block (1221 Tower Ave.) each show the emergence of the Chicago-inspired Commercial style with its love of expansive window areas, simplified lines and bold structural rationalization. Still tied to traditional 19th century picturesque forms, each structure still retains decorative treatments such as carved stone capitals and window details.

More extensive descriptive information on individual sites can be found on the enclosed ISF forms.

A number of the structures being nominated were designed by various locally and regionally prominent architects. Among them was Carl Wirth, whose work included both the Empire Block (1202 Tower Ave.) and the Wemyss Block (1301 Tower Ave.), both of whose strong, bold designs reflect the eclectic tastes of the late 19th century and the broad range of skills acquired by their architect. Wirth's efforts throughout the city, in both residential and commercial commissions, constitute the most prodigious output of any known designer to have worked in the city. Wirth's business and social connections to many of the leading investors and businessmen in the community no doubt accounted in large part for his prodigious effort. Among the other regional architects to have worked in the city were respected firms from Minneapolis (C.C. Haight-Minnesota Block), St. Paul (Clarence Johnston Trade and Commerce Building), and Ashland (Conover, Porter and Padley-Northern Block).

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

The city of Superior, Wisconsin received a Historic Preservation survey and planning grant in 1983 from the Historic Preservation Division of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. The purpose of the grant was to conduct an intensive architectural and historical survey of the cultural resources of the Lake Superior community. James Kumbera of the Superior Community Development Office was the local project director. Paul R. Lusignan, as a private preservation consultant was hired to conduct the comprehensive survey and also to prepare the accompanying nomination.

The initial phase of the intensive survey involved the recording, photographing and mapping of approximately 700 individual sites of architectural and/or historical interest within the city. The ongoing historical research carried on concurrently with the field phase of the project revealed an extremely high concentration of speculative commercial construction in the city centered between the years 1888 and 1893. Taken together this visual and documentary information would serve as the basis for the later thematic nomination.

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

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

For NPS use only  
received  
date entered

Superior, WI

Continuation sheet Superior Commercial Blocks Item number 7 Page 3

Upon more extensive investigation it was discovered that this "Boom era" and its associated structures were representative of a uniquely significant development (period) phase within the community. A total of 13 major buildings from this era were found to be extant; each structure an impressive architectural cornerstone within the commercial district of the community. Based on the accumulated architectural and historical data each site was revisited and carefully assessed as to its integrity and comparative value in relation to each of the other sites. Intensive research to gather more site specific historical information on the buildings was also conducted.

Of the 13 individual sites identified two were already listed on the National Register of Historic Places (New Jersey Block NRHP 1983, Trade & Commerce Building, NRHP 1979). Each of the remaining structures was given a final examination in order to evaluate the effective loss of integrity, if any, accrued by the buildings over the years. Because virtually all of the buildings had received alterations and additions to some extent; retention of identifying details was used as a criteria for eligibility. Most of the buildings within the thematic group have been altered to some degree, particularly at the first story level and at the upper windows. In some instances the buildings had been painted and elaborate cornice details removed. The only building disqualified from inclusion in the nomination had lost important structural elements (top floor, window units) and survived only in a highly modified form (stucco exterior resurfacing). The Hammond Block at 817 Tower Ave. was the only structure to be excluded. All of the nominated properties are easily recognizable as originally constructed despite minor, sometimes unsympathetic and distracting alterations. Each building retains sufficient detail and integrity to convey the 19th century character of the defining theme of major speculative commercial designs within the central business districts of the community.

A final list of 12 buildings, including two properties presently listed on the National Register, was created as those sites eligible for inclusion in the accompanying nomination.

## 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 checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
<input type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify)
				<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 19th cent. community development
<b>Specific dates</b>	1888-1892	<b>Builder/Architect</b>	various - see individual ISFs	

### Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

#### INTRODUCTION

The twelve buildings included in this thematic nomination represent an important and distinctive local resource of architectural and historical significance in understanding the growth and development of the Lake Superior community of Superior, Wisconsin during the late 19th century. Architecturally significant examples of late nineteenth century urban commercial designs (at the local level), including the Romanesque Revival, Richardsonian Romanesque, and Commercial styles, the buildings presented represent a historically significant era of commercial and community development in the northwestern Wisconsin community.

Each site is representative of the speculative growth and development seen in the small port community of Superior in the period between 1888 and 1892. Spurred on by the introduction of rail service and harbor development, the city of Superior quickly became the focus of extensive investment by eastern business concerns, land speculating companies and individual entrepreneurs. The most visible manifestations of that investment tide were the large number of speculative office and commercial buildings erected in the area around Tower Ave. and East 5th Street. Lining the major commercial avenues in the East End and in West Superior by 1892 would be a succession of prominent commercial buildings reflecting the rich architectural traditions of the day and the enormous financial prosperity achieved by the community. The nominated structures in this study represent the remaining extant eligible elements of that unique developmental force and era within the community. One that (before it was curtailed by the economic depression of 1893), firmly established Superior as the center of business and commerce at the head of the lakes. Each site continues, even today, as a major center of commercial activity in the downtown area of the city.

The most substantial 19th century structures to be erected in the business center of the city, each of the buildings is an imposing structure of brick or masonry construction representing the city's most significant examples of the eclectic building styles and forms that marked the late 1880s and 1890s.

#### HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

The community of Superior, first platted in 1853<sup>1</sup>, sustained itself through most of the mid and late 19th century as a small, isolated port town. Settled and platted by a group of St. Paul and eastern investors, the early commercial development in Superior took place in the area now known as the East End, along Superior Bay. It was here that the first small-scale settlements occurred in the 1850s. The commercial center at that time existed only as clustered small structures of wood-frame construction. Through early 1857, business would continue to be extremely active, substantial numbers

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

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

For NPS use only

received

date entered

Superior, WI

Continuation sheet Superior Commercial Blocks Item number 8 Page 1

of residences were erected, new industries were starting or being planned, and money and men were coming in from the urban centers across the Midwest and east, promising a prosperous future. The failure of rail lines to reach the community and the catastrophic nation-wide financial panic of 1857, however, saw the townsite drop from a population of 2,500 to one of less than 500 in the space of a single year.<sup>2</sup> The community of Superior quickly became a ghost town. Paralyzed by the loss of the speculative investment capital that had been its early base, the townsite fell into an uneasy state of suspended animation that would last until the 1880s, when with the continued expansion of trade in the upper midwest and the growing realization of the commercial potential of the area at the head of the lakes, land speculators and developers began to take a more intense interest in the unplatted areas to the west of the original Superior settlement, along St. Louis Bay. This awakened interest and its eventual manifestation was most strongly tied to the efforts of one group, the Land and River Improvement Company and its original organizer, General John H. Hammond.

It was the Land & River Improvement Co. that was to act as the main catalyst for the growth and development of this untapped region and almost single-handedly determined the shape of the present downtown area in which the majority of the nominated properties are located. General Hammond had visited the Superior area in 1882 and was immediately caught by the possibilities and potential it offered. Upon returning east, he quickly set to work organizing a land speculating company to develop the area. Organizing the New Jersey-based Land & River Improvement Co. in 1883 with financing from various eastern associates, Hammond quickly began investing large amounts of money in land in the western areas of the city, and succeeded in quickly turning the undeveloped area of forest land and swamp into a townsite available for development.

It was the intention of the eastern based land & River Improvement Co. to see to it that their vast holdings in Superior were developed into a major, new center of business, finance and commerce on Lake Superior. The earliest efforts of the firm were directed towards the establishment of railroads and industrial sites in the townsite. The railroad would become the foundation and centerpiece for subsequent development. By 1889 the company had fairly well succeeded in helping to establish West Superior as a substantial commerce and manufacturing center with the erection of the West Superior Iron and Steel Co. plant, the arrival of five separate railroad lines, and the establishment of numerous grain, flour, coal and lumber enterprises. At this point, the Land & River Co., under the management of Rowland J. Wemyss, turned to the development of a major commercial and business center for the community and instituted a large scale building program. With this new emphasis, the development of West Superior began to move from the waterfront areas to the unoccupied areas of Tower Avenue between present day Broadway and Belknap Streets. It is in the buildings of this developmental period (1888-1892) that our most tangible proof is still visible today of the impact and imprint that the Land & River Co. had on the community. These early efforts are visible today in the commanding commercial blocks identified in the nomination.

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

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

For NPS use only  
received  
date entered

Superior, WI

Continuation sheet Superior Commercial Blocks Item number 8 Page 2

In general, commercial development prior to this new effort was relegated to one and two story wood-frame or brick veneered storefronts and offices, boarding houses and workers hotels. Each structure represented the most basic of architectural treatments, designed more for utility and ease of erection than aesthetic reasons. The majority of these earliest structures no longer exist, having been replaced by later twentieth century development. The buildings of the "Boom Period" (as the span between 1888 and 1892 has come to be known) in contrast were to be constructed in the most modern and substantial materials, styles and methods available. The architecture was to reflect the eastern mentality of the investors and their attempt to create an eastern-flavored, urban center in the new western frontier of northwestern Wisconsin. Their ultimate dream, the creation of a "new Chicago."

The first major construction project taken on by the Land & River Co. was that of the West Superior Hotel (no longer extant). Construction of the four story solid brick structure was thought foolish by many. The building when built was located "way off in the woods" in an as of yet totally undeveloped area.<sup>3</sup> But the building soon caught the interest of a broad spectrum of eastern and regional businessmen and entrepreneurs alerted to the investment potential of the area by the Land & River Company. Soon investment money, under the control of the Land & River Co. was flooding into the region. In 1889, the two story New Jersey Block (1424 Tower Ave.) was completed at a cost of \$50,000 at the northeast corner of Belknap and Tower Ave., directly across from the hotel.<sup>4</sup> (The building was the first of many Land & River Co. investments to take on the name of a particular state in the union, often that most associated with the source of original financial backing for the project.) The building contained numerous commercial concerns on the first floor and richly decorated office and residential quarters on the second. Constructed in brick and stone, the block along with its adjacent Grand Opera House (destroyed 1939) turned the isolated intersection into an energetic focal point for continued commercial development. The completion of the New Jersey Block was quickly followed by the erection of the three story Massachusetts and Watkins blocks.

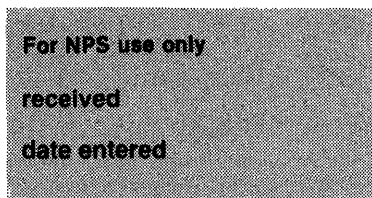
The Massachusetts Block (1525 Tower Ave.), made possible by Land & River Co. directed investment was planned as a brick commercial and office structure. Designed in a Romanesque Revival manner, the building marked the southernmost extent of Tower Avenue development. The nearby Watkins Block, at the corner of Tower Ave. and Belknap (destroyed 1956), was built by Francis Watkins and A.W. Stow to complete the intersection. A third 1889 building, the Wisconsin Block (destroyed 1979) was built through the action of the Land & River Co. and Hobart Stocking of Eau Claire, WI on the corner of Tower Avenue and Winter Street. Before the end of the year, Superior also saw the construction of the grandly arched Ritchie Block by early Superior land owner James S. Ritchie (no longer extant).<sup>5</sup> Each of the building efforts was a noteworthy achievement, not only establishing Tower Ave. as a sizable commercial district, but in their richness and articulation revealing a new maturity of architectural design in the downtown area. It would be a new architectural maturity shared by all of the new major buildings that came to be built after the watershed year of 1888. As the town prospered its architecture evolved from the merely practical to the decidedly stylish. The impressive buildings being built now demonstrated a permanence and professionalism of design which certainly reassured both citizens and interested investors of the stability of the new emerging city.



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

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

Superior, WI



Continuation sheet Superior Commercial Blocks Item number 8 Page 3

As noted in the Ritchie Block and Watkins Block, the Land & River Improvement Co. was not alone in its attempts to create and attract commercial development in the community. Small competing land speculating companies established in various areas of the city. The most visible was the Superior Improvement Co. of Henry D. Minot, a Boston businessman with ties to the Great Northern Railroad. During 1889-90, Monot's improvement company attempted to wrestle the commercial district away from the Land & River Company's monopolistic domain by erecting the Trade and Commerce Building on the northeast corner of Hammond Ave. and Broadway (916 Hammond Ave.). The building, a massive rusticated stone Richardsonian office structure was to later become the city hall building. Minot's Superior Improvement Co. also succeeded in building a large hotel, The Boradway (no longer extant) diagonally across from the Trade & Commerce Building. Extrodinarily fine buildings and profitable commercial ventures, the work of the Superior Improvement Co. failed in its ultimate goal due in part to the untimely death of Minot and the continued building program of the Land & River Co., which picked up more speed in the 1890s.

The Land & River organization continued its investment and building operations in early 1890 with the erection of commercial/office blocks at 1402 Tower Ave. and 1517 Tower Ave.; referred to locally as the New York and Washington Blocks. The Romanesque Revival New York Block with its ten ground-floor storefronts was built for \$100,000 and its stores were fully occupied within the year. The Washington Block, built in cooperation with W.H. Folsom of New York, would house offices for a number of importnat commercial firms operating in the port city, including the Northwest Hanna Coal Company.

During 1890 and 1891 speculative commercial construction was carried out by several Land and River Improvement Co. agents on their own behalf. Ogden Hammond, the son of John Hammond, built the four st'ry Romanesque detailed Hammond Block on the northwest corner of Winter St. and Tower Avenue. Ravaged by fire and unsympathetic alterations the two story structure now represents only a shadow of its former status. Francis Weeks of New York, acting president of the Land & River Co. at the time, created plans for the construction of an eight story commercial and office block at Broadway and Tower. His plans would only come to fruition as the two story Berkshire Block (917 Tower Ave.). The unstable financial situations that were soon to grip the region never allowed his eight story giant to be built.

In the East End of the city, the Northern Improvement Co. was established by local investors and succeeded in erecting the two story Northern Block (2229 East 5th Street) in 1892 within the growing commercial area located along East 5th Street. A year earlier Abram G. Descent had succeeded in erecting the \$32,000 Descent Block (502 22nd Ave. E.). Also erected in the area was the Euclid Hotel (demolished). Unfortunatly, large scale development in that area of the city never achieved the great success of the Tower Avenue area, and the East End remained only a minor secondary commercial center.

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

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

For NPS use only

received

date entered

Superior, WI

Continuation sheet Superior Commercial Blocks Item number 8 Page 4

The year 1892 proved to be the strongest for commercial speculation and investment in the downtown area, and unknowingly, the last. A number of earliest structures were completed and opened, and the largest of the Land and River Company's projects were initiated. Among the buildings erected in the year were the Minnesota Block (1507 Tower Ave.); the Maryland Block (1225 Tower Ave.); and the Wemyss Block (1301 Tower Ave.). The Maryland Block, later to become the home of the influential SUPERIOR EVENING TELEGRAM, and the Wemyss Building, built by Land & River Co. manager Rowland Wemyss, were located adjacent to each other on opposite corners at the intersection of Tower Avenue and N 13th Street. Located a block to the north, on the east side of Tower Avenue, was the substantial Empire Block (1202 Tower Ave.), erected in 1892 for the Empire Building Co. headed by Franklin Billings and Edward Bailey. The three story Romanesque style design was designed by local architect Carl Wirth.

By far the most imposing structure to be erected in the new commercial district along Tower Avenue during the Boom Period was the Land & River Improvement Company's Minnesota Block, located on the last vacant corner at the intersection of Tower and Belknap Street. Designed by architect C. C. Haight of Minneapolis, the four story brick block was to be the central office headquarters for the Land and River Co. as well as the West Superior Iron & Steel Company. The two lower floors of the 130' x 150' building were occupied by the Spicer-Fanning Dry Goods store, the city's largest such concern throughout most of the late 19th century. In 1894 the block was renamed the Board of Trade Building, becoming the business center of commerce and trade within the port.

By 1892, the community of Superior was being recognized by many as the "Second City of Wisconsin." In the short span of 10 years since the arrival of the first railroad into the city, the community had grown to a population upwards of 34,000. The year 1892, however, was to be the last for major commercial construction within the center of the city. The glory of "Boom era" speculation and prosperity would once more see the dark spectre of gloom as the nationwide financial crisis of 1893 brought the city growth to a sudden halt. Commercial development which had seen massive business blocks erected in the major business centers of the community abruptly ceased; industrial concerns closed their doors; and speculative investments as a whole simply stopped. The age of the huge, monolithic commercial block was over in the community. The simple lack of funds and the hesitancy of investors to invest further in speculative enterprises meant that construction within the community returned to a smaller more functionally dictated scale. The Land and River Improvement Co., severely shaken by the depression, turned their efforts towards smaller scale projects, particularly the development of residential areas, while a number of the smaller land speculating firms were forced to liquidate their holdings in the community.

Although the community's dramatic dreams of rivaling Chicago fell to the wayside with the depression, the city had given itself a strong foundation. During the last years of the nineteenth century and through the early twentieth century the scale of construction within the central commercial districts was typified by small, economically designed structures which were erected to meet the immediate needs of their sponsors, leaving the Boom Period commercial blocks as the commanding focal points of the downtown area.

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

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

For NPS use only

received

date entered

Superior, WI

Continuation sheet Superior Commercial Blocks Item number 8 Page 5

The work of the Land & River Improvement Co. and the hosts of other smaller speculative agents from 1888 to 1892, had succeeded in creating in Superior, the heart of an urban-scaled commercial district that controlled the workings of a massive port and the prosperous community around it. The efforts of these groups not only represented the first extensive use of skilled craftsmen and expensive materials, but it also brought the first extensive involvement of professional architects, whose work reflected the reigning styles and technology of the period.

ARCHITECTURE

The commercial structures of the late 19th century Boom Period in Superior represent in their styling, construction methods and overall massing, a concentrated group of locally significant structures, which spoke visually of the new prosperity and growing status of the Lake Superior community at the end of the century. Representing a myriad of styles, many of the nominated properties constitute local architectural landmarks within the downtown area, each testifying to the growing 19th century architectural sophistication of the isolated port city. Affirming their symbolic prominence all but one of the nominated structures is formally sited on a generous corner lot. As completed, each building represented a significant new resource in the community. Unfortunately various alterations over the years have caused a loss of integrity to some of the buildings compromising their overall visual appearance.

Of the structures to still maintain sufficient original integrity, the largest number represent the traditions of the Victorian Romanesque Revival style. The best preserved example is the NRHP listed New Jersey Block at 1424-30 Tower Avenue. Typical of the style as seen in the Superior buildings is the use of contrasting wall surfaces of deep-red pressed brick and native Lake Superior sandstone; rhythmic window fenestration patterns commonly crowned with rounded arches or continuous arcades; and decorative features such as corbelled brickwork and richly carved stone. In addition to the New Jersey Block significant examples of the style are found in the Massachusetts Block (1525 Tower Ave.), the Empire Block (1202 Tower Ave.), the Descent Block (502 22nd Ave. E.), and the Northern Block (2229 E. 5th St.). The Empire Block departs from the round-arched detailing common to the other buildings and features trabeated window openings created by massive rusticated sandstone lintels. The New York Block, another example of the Romanesque style was not considered due to the loss of integrity of the building's major facade.

The Trade and Commerce Building (916 Hammond Ave. NRHP 1979) and the two story Berkshire Block at 917 Tower Ave. are both outstanding examples of the Richardsonian Romanesque style. Built of rusticated native stone, each is a rugged example of fine masonry construction, lending a strong sense of permanence to the commercial streetscape.

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

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

For NPS use only  
received  
date entered

Superior, WI

Continuation sheet Superior Commercial Blocks Item number 8 Page 6

The 1892 Wemyss Block at 1301 Tower Ave. is a distinctive commercial building which employs a dramatic blend of Romanesque and earlier Classical Revival forms to create a unique eclectic design. The three story brick and steel-framed structure's most decorative feature is an arcaded upper floor area, which displays slender classical columns and Romanesque detailed corner piers. A second classically inspired design is that of the Washington Block at 1517 Tower Ave., where richly carved terra cotta details are used to decorate a sizable three story cream brick structure.

Later examples of the Romanesque style in Superior began increasingly to draw from the developments of the late 19th century Commercial style as it was flourishing in such midwestern cities as Chicago and Minneapolis-St. Paul. In the increasing use of both structural steel framing and regular fenestration patterns involving large expanses of rectangular glazing, buildings such as the 1892 Minnesota Block (1507 Tower Ave.) and the Maryland Block (1225 Tower Ave.) became much more restrained architectural statements typical of the Commercial style, and exterior ornamentation became a much more subordinate factor. In both of these significant buildings, however, minor stylistic details associated with the Romanesque traditions are still visible as ingredients to the overall design.

The architectural vocabulary of the Superior Boom Period buildings expressed the desired 19th century sense of permanent and urban sophistication sought after by both residents and local investors and brought a clear sense of prosperity to the newly emerging community.

COMMERCIAL/COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

The late nineteenth century in Wisconsin represented an era of substantial growth for urban areas across the state, often led by the entrepreneurial efforts of eastern and regional businessmen and land speculators. No where was this effort and developmental force more evident than in the isolated Lake Superior community of Superior, where in the short span of the decade between 1882 and 1892 a desolate flat area was transformed into the trade and commerce hub of an expanding and prosperous community. Because of the efforts of individuals and firms like the Land & River Improvement Company, Henry Minot, Rowland Wemyss and the Empire Building Co., the Tower Avenue and E 5th St. areas became the major commercial centers serving one of the Great Lake's fastest growing port cities. The efforts of the speculators in the early years of the 1880s had made possible the arrival of the Great Northern, Northern Pacific and other rail lines to the region. They had led to the establishment of the massive West Superior Iron & Steel Co. and seen to the paving and clearing of roads and the dredging of the harbor for shipping activities. By 1888 the developers had turned their attention to the establishment of a new commercial center for the city, one more in keeping with its foreseen future status as the Chicago of the northwest and set about interesting a broad spectrum of eastern

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

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

For NPS use only

received

date entered

Superior, WI

Continuation sheet Superior Commercial Blocks Item number 8

Page 7

and regional businessmen in investing in the construction of major commercial blocks. The manifestation of their developmental efforts were the great speculative commercial and office blocks being nominated in this form. As specified on each of the individual Intensive Survey Forms, the nomination of all 10 commercial structures is based on their historically significant roles as representatives of the city's most intensive and largest scale commercial growth period.

---

Footnotes

1. Flower, F., Eye of the Northwest, (Milw.:King, Fowle & Co., 1890) pp. 28-32.
2. Ibid., p. 62
3. Ibid., p. 164.
4. Evening Telegram, Sueprior, WI. 2/5/1934
5. Ibid.

Site specific notations can be found on the individual ISF forms. General historical background was condensed from the 1983 Superior Intensive Survey Report on file at the SHSW.

## 9. Major Bibliographical References

Flower, F., The Eye of the Northwest, Hing, Fowle & Co., Milwaukee, 1890.

Evening Telegram, Superior, WI.

Superior Dailey Leader, Superior, WI.

## 10. Geographical Data

Acreege of nominated property all less than one acre

Quadrangle name Superior WI-MINN

Quadrangle scale 1:24000

UTM References see ISFs for individual UTM reference coordinates.

A	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	B	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
C	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	D	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
E	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	F	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
G	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	H	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

### Verbal boundary description and justification

Various - see individual ISF notations.

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

state	code	county	code

## 11. Form Prepared By

name/title Paul R. Lusignan, Private Preservation Consultant

organization NA date January, 1984, /updated Feb. 1985.

street & number 522 West Wilson St. #104 telephone (608) 256-2048

city or town Madison state Wisconsin 53703

## 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 Director of Historic Preservation

date April 30, 1985

For NPS use only

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



date 6/27/85

Keeper of the National Register

Attest:

Chief of Registration



date

MAJOR (SPECULATIVE) COMMERCIAL BLOCKS OF SUPERIOR'S BOOM PERIOD 1888-1892.

INVENTORY

Code #	Historic Name	Common Name	Address	Date of Construction	*
A	Berkshire Block	Amsoil Building	917-927 Tower Avenue	1892	*
B	Empire Block	Empire Block	1202-1208 Tower Avenue	1892	-
C	Maryland Block	Badger Block	1221-1227 Tower Avenue	1892	*
D	Massachusetts Block	Mass. Block	1525-1531 Tower Avenue	1889	*
E	Minnesota Block	Board of Trade Building	1501-1511 Tower Avenue	1891-92	*
F	New York Block	New York Block	1402-1412 Tower Avenue	1889	*
G	Washington Block	Washington Block	1517-1523 Tower Avenue	1891	*
H	Wemyss Block	Kresge Building	1301-1305 Tower Avenue	1892	*
I	Descent Block	Superior National Bank	502-510 22nd Ave. East	1891	-
J	Northern Block	Northern Block	2229 East 5th Street	1892	-

National Register Listed Blocks

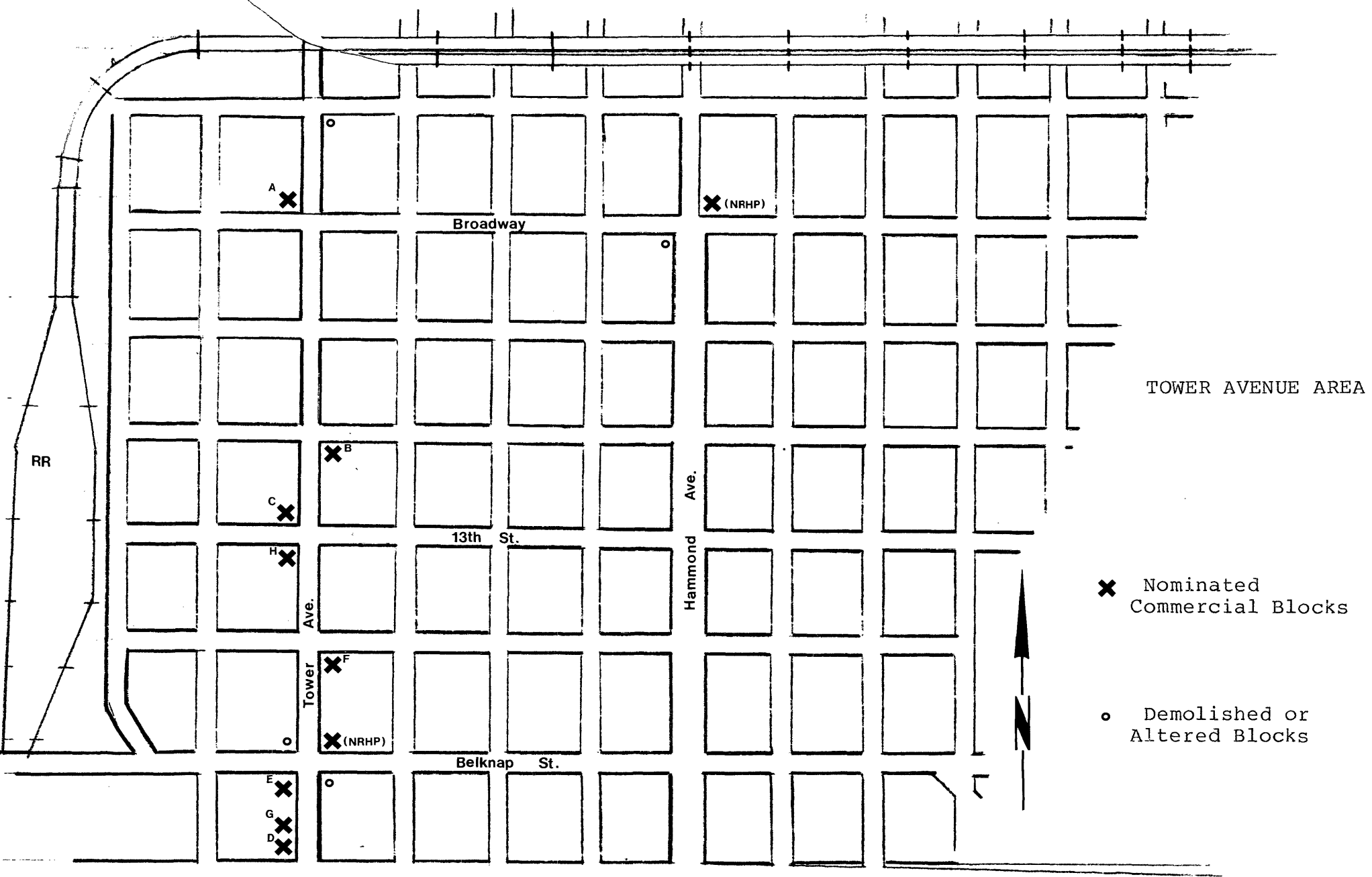
-	New Jersey Block	Globe News Building	1424-1430 Tower Avenue	1889	(NRHP 1983)
-	Trade & Commerce Building	Old City Hall Building	916 Hammond Avenue	1890	(NRHP 1979)

Demolished or Altered Commercial Blocks

-	Hammond Block	-	Ritchie Block
-	Wisconsin Block	-	West Superior Hotel
-	Broadway Hotel	-	Euclid Hotel
-	Watkins Block	-	First National Bank Building

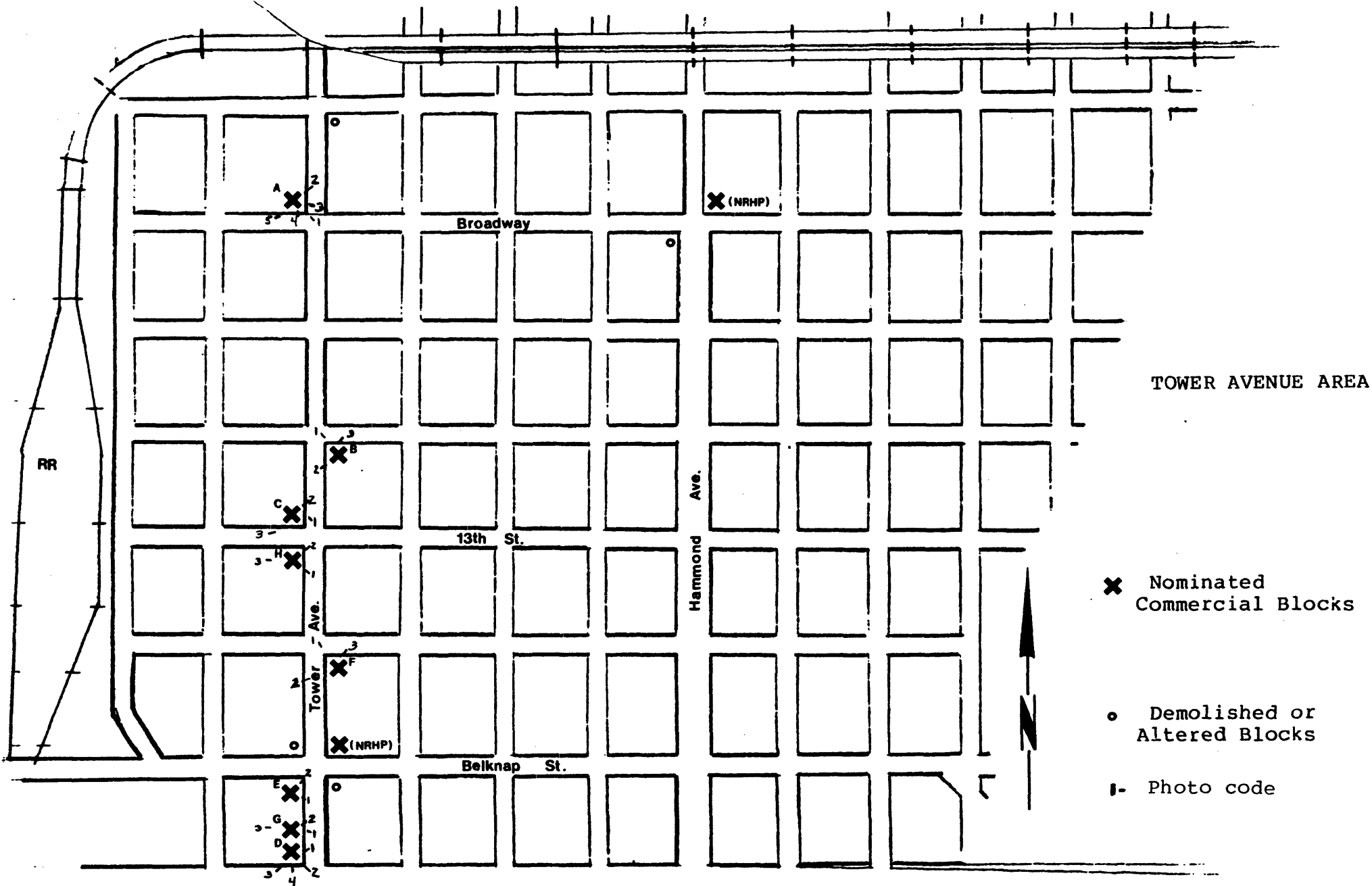
\* Blocks built by the Land & River Improvement Co. or business investors closely associated with the firm.

MAJOR (SPECULATIVE) COMMERCIAL BLOCKS OF SUPERIOR'S BOOM PERIOD 1888-1892.



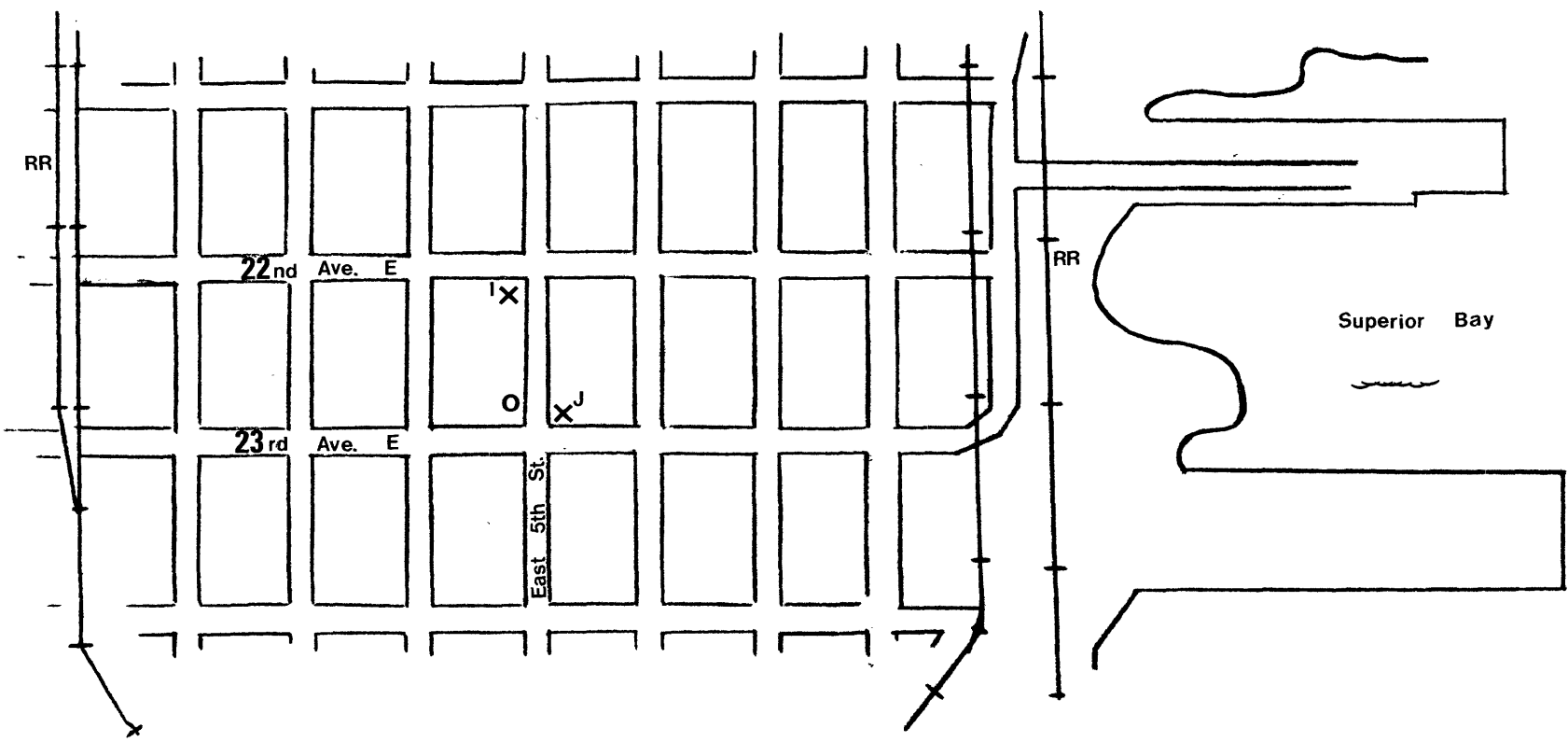


MAJOR (SPECULATIVE) COMMERCIAL BLOCKS OF SUPERIOR'S BOOM PERIOD 1888-1892.



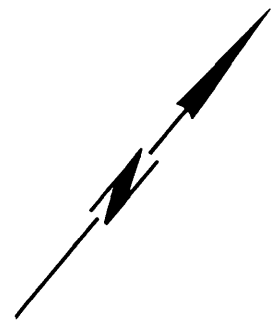
MAJOR (SPECULATIVE) COMMERCIAL BLOCKS OF SUPERIOR'S BOOM PERIOD 1888-1892.

EAST END AREA



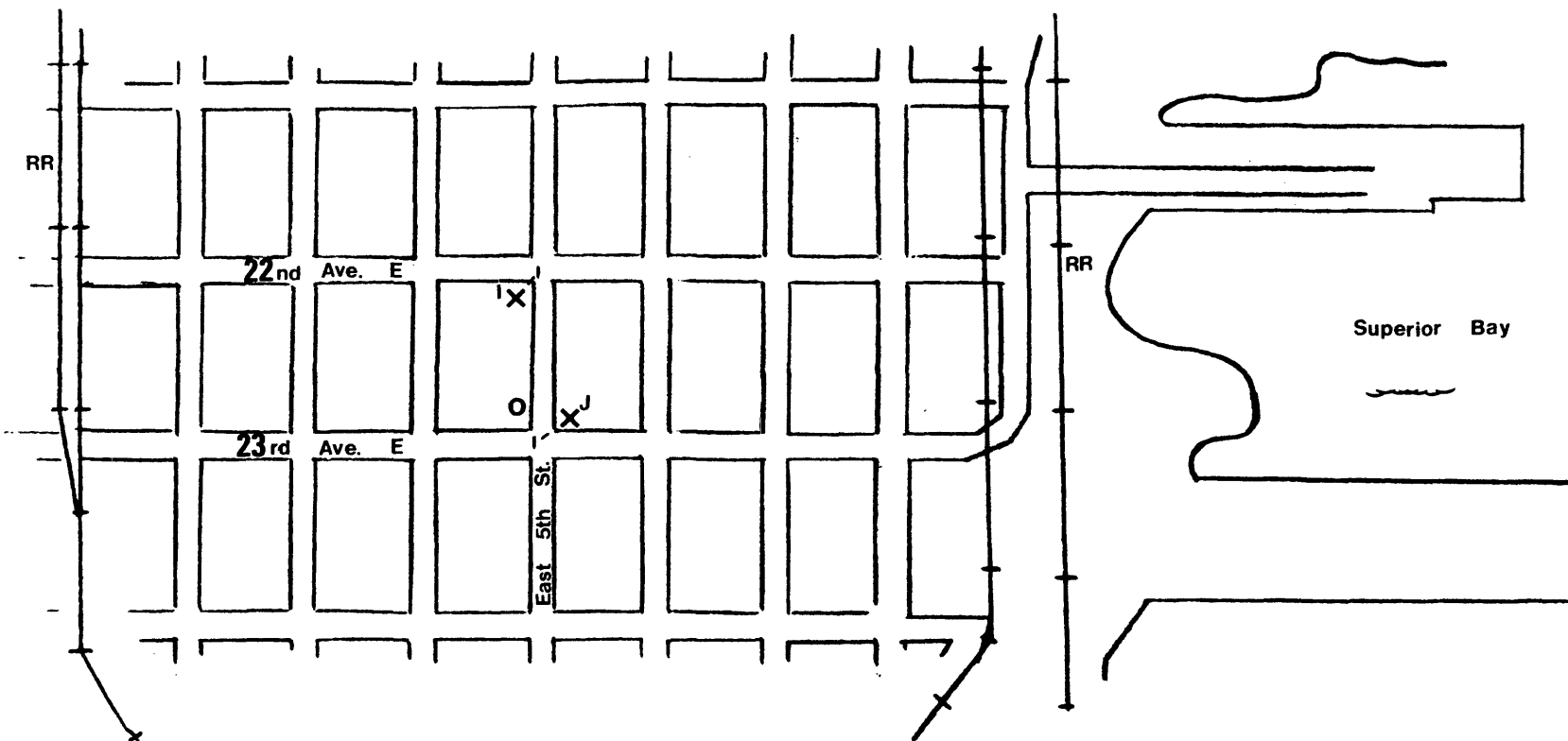
x Nominated Commercial Blocks

o Demolished Blocks



MAJOR (SPECULATIVE) COMMERCIAL BLOCKS OF SUPERIOR'S BOOM PERIOD 1888-1892.

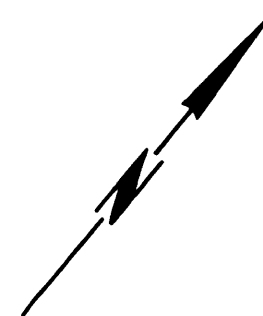
EAST END AREA



x Nominated Commercial Blocks

o Demolished Blocks

1- Photo Code



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Inventory—Nomination Form

For NPS use only  
received 5/16/85  
date entered

Continuation sheet

Item number

Page

Multiple Resource Area  
Thematic Group

dnr-11

Name Speculative Commercial Blocks of Superior's Boom Period 1888-1892 TR  
State Douglas County, WISCONSIN

Cover 6/27/85

Nomination/Type of Review

Date/Signature

1. Descent Block **DOE/OWNER OBJECTION**  
~~Historic Review~~

Keeper Beth Grovona 6/27/85

Attest \_\_\_\_\_

2. Berkshire Block **Entered in the National Register**

Keeper Melona Byers 6/27/85

Attest \_\_\_\_\_

3. Empire Block **Entered in the National Register**

for Keeper Melona Byers 6/27/85

Attest \_\_\_\_\_

4. Maryland Block **Entered in the National Register**

for Keeper Melona Byers 6/27/85

Attest \_\_\_\_\_

5. Massachusetts Block **Entered in the National Register**

for Keeper Melona Byers 6/27/85

Attest \_\_\_\_\_

6. Minnesota Block-Board of Trade Building **Entered in the National Register**

for Keeper Melona Byers 6/27/85

Attest \_\_\_\_\_

7. Northern Block **Entered in the National Register**

for Keeper Melona Byers 6/27/85

Attest \_\_\_\_\_

8. New York Block **Entered in the National Register**

for Keeper Melona Byers 6/27/85

Attest \_\_\_\_\_

9. Washington Block **Entered in the National Register**

for Keeper Melona Byers 6/27/85

Attest \_\_\_\_\_

10. Wemyss Building **Entered in the National Register**

for Keeper Melona Byers 6/27/85

Attest \_\_\_\_\_