

EL VERNONA-JOHN RINGLING HOTEL
(John Ringling Towers)
111 North Tamiami Trail (U.S. Highway 41)
Sarasota
Sarasota County
Florida

HABS FL-405
FL-405

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

FIELD RECORDS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
SOUTHEAST REGIONAL OFFICE
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
100 Alabama St. NW
Atlanta, GA 30303

HABS
FL-405

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDING SURVEY

EL VERNONA HOTEL-JOHN RINGLING HOTEL (John Ringling Towers) HABS No. FL-405

Location: 111 North Tamiami Trail (U.S. 41)
(Northwest corner of U.S. 41 and 1st Street)
Sarasota
Sarasota County
Florida

U.S.G.S. Sarasota 7.5' Quadrangle, Universal Transverse
Mercator Coordinates:
17.346950.3024550

Present Owner: C. Robert Buford
1861 N. Rock Road, Suite 200
Wichita, KS 67206

Present Occupant: Vacant from 1980 through June 1998

Present Use: Demolished June 1998

Significance: The El Vernona Hotel was designed by Dwight James Baum and constructed in 1926 by the Burns Construction Company at an estimated cost of \$800,000. From the beginning, the hotel was the center of glamour and activity in Sarasota. Although constructed by Owen Burns, a Sarasota real estate developer, John Ringling of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus purchased the property four years after it opened. Ringling changed the name and the management of the hotel, but it remained a posh destination for the wealthy and elite. After Ringling's death in 1936, his nephew, John Ringling North, introduced a circus theme to the hotel. Trapeze artists and aerialists swung from ropes tied to wood beams in the dining room during the heyday of the hotel in the 1940s and early 1950s. The hotel closed ca. 1957, was converted to apartments and reopened in 1964. It closed again in 1980, and remained vacant for eighteen years. After numerous unsuccessful attempts to rehabilitate the building, it was demolished in June 1998.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Date of erection: The El Vernona Hotel was completed prior to Labor Day, September 6, 1926. Although the exact date in which construction work started is not known, construction lasted approximately one year according to the *Sarasota Herald*.¹ A *Sarasota Herald* newspaper writer toured the almost completed hotel in May 1926, and, in the article "Beautiful Inn Rich in Design Will Make Bow," recorded his impressions. He stated that the hotel would open in June 1926;² a historic photograph from the Syracuse University Library, Department of Special Collections supports the advertised June opening. In the photograph, a sign draped across the front of the still under-construction building stated "Hotel El Vernona, Maximum of Comfort - Minimum of Cost, European Plan Rates, Will Open About June 1, 1926, Harry C. Griswold, Proprietor."³ However, the opening was delayed until September, probably in hopes that tourism would be increasing by then. The hotel opened informally on Labor Day, September 6, 1926.⁴ A formal opening ball marked the occasion of the hotel's official opening on December 31, 1926. An original architect's plaque, possibly containing the original construction date, was removed as a result of vandalism to the building during the 1980s. It appears that the original plans for the El Vernona Hotel have not survived.

2. Architect: Dwight James Baum, noted New York architect, graduated from Syracuse University in 1909 with a bachelor's degree in architecture. Initially working as a draftsman with various architectural firms in New York City, Baum purchased a lot in Fieldston and designed and constructed a house for his growing family. The Delafield family started Fieldston as a planned community with private streets and deed restrictions on the architectural standards of the proposed homes. The Delafields approved of Baum's home so much that they encouraged all new buyers to enlist Baum to design their homes. With the increased income, Baum left his drafting position, opened his own practice in 1914, and joined the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects in 1918.⁵ Developed largely before 1940, Fieldston remains architecturally cohesive, and, with approximately a third of the homes designed by Baum, features the largest collection of his residential work.⁶

Baum did not focus on one particular style but designed in many different eclectic styles popular during the period. According to Harvey Wiley Corbett in the preface to the 1927 monograph on Dwight James Baum,

It is only the exceptional architect who has the force of will and the adventurous spirit to roam through all styles and all periods and make himself master of them all. And it seems to me that this is the signal achievement of Dwight James Baum in the realm of domestic architecture. He has had the spirit and the gusto to tackle Colonial, Georgian, Italian, Tudor, etc., and to emerge in every case with banners

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flying...Architecturally Mr. Baum is no ordinary fiddler, but a virtuoso in his own right.⁷

Baum designed numerous other residences in the New York City vicinity as well as throughout states along the eastern seaboard. Many of these homes were fashionable residences for rich clients. Praised for his attention to detail, interest in unifying site and structure, and ability to adapt to his client's needs, Baum won numerous awards for his residential designs including the gold medal awarded by the Better Homes of America which was presented by President Herbert Hoover in 1932.⁸

Baum first visited Sarasota around 1922 at the bequest of John and Mable Ringling, who hired him to design Ca'd'Zan.⁹ Florida, with its warm climate, reminded Baum of his visit to California in 1917. During his visit, he studied Spanish-inspired designs resulting from the San Diego Exposition of 1915 which featured the design grouping of buildings and landscape gardening, aspects which later influenced his Sarasota work.¹⁰ While drawing the plans and constructing Ca'd'Zan in 1924-25, the architect worked with Owen Burns, whose company constructed the house. Baum would work closely with Burns throughout the next several years as Baum designed Burns' real estate office, his hotel, and several residences, including Burns' own house, for the Ringling Isles Corporation on St. Armands Key.

After collaborating with Baum on the construction of Ca'd'Zan, Burns hired Baum to design an office complex for Burns' business interests on the northwest corner of Seventh Street and Broadway Avenue (now First Street and U.S. 41/Tamiami Trail). The office building, completed by May 1925, initially housed the Burns Realty Company, the Burns Supply Company, and the John Ringling Estates office.¹¹ Recognizing the potential of the Florida land boom which was just starting, Baum decided to open an office in Burns' office complex in Sarasota while still maintaining his practice in New York.¹² The development along Broadway, which Burns spearheaded, shifted the concentration of construction from the commercial buildings erected on Main Street to the Sarasota bayfront, north of North Palm Avenue.¹³

Owen Burns also commissioned Dwight James Baum to design the hotel he wanted to construct on the mainland which was erected north of his office complex. The hotel was located only three blocks from downtown Sarasota at the intersection of Seventh Street and Broadway Avenue, "the gateway of the celebrated Tamiami Trail into Sarasota."¹⁴ Construction of the hotel commenced in mid-1925, around the time that the office complex was nearing completion.¹⁵ Baum incorporated several design elements which he had observed at the Mission Inn in Riverside, California into his design of the El Vernona Hotel. Most notable is the three-bay, shed roof loggia located at the northwest corner of the building which recalls the buttressed sidewalks of the Mission Inn. According to the 1983 National Register nomination for the hotel,

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Mr. Baum was particularly fascinated with the use of wrought iron rejas . . . and the use of split spindles used as window grilles [at the Mission Inn]: “all [rooms] have shuttered doors and screens formed by splitting some balusters in two and tacking on each side of netting making both a practical and artistic door.”¹⁶

Baum applied the same technique to create unique screen doors throughout the hotel and wrought iron screens in the lobby. The hotel formally opened to high local acclaim with a grand ball on New Year’s Eve 1926.

With the well-received designs for the El Vernona and Ca’d’Zan, Baum grew in popularity within the elite circles of Sarasota. As a result of his presence in the community, he gained several Sarasota commissions including ones to design the El Vernona Apartments (present-day Belle Haven), the Sarasota Times Building, and the Sarasota County Courthouse which consisted of a complex of three elements including a tower.¹⁷ With the decline of the land boom in 1926, several of Baum’s designs were never constructed, including a Presbyterian church, the Whispering Sands residential development, and a Y.W.C.A. in Sarasota.¹⁸ Other designs and plans for buildings throughout the state, including those for apartments in Jacksonville, a clubhouse in Lake Wales, a Y.M.C.A. in Orlando, and two hotels and an athletic club in Tampa, never came to fruition.¹⁹ At the end of the land boom, Baum closed his Sarasota office and returned to New York.²⁰

Partially due to his wife’s inheritance, but also through his association with the Architectural League of New York, Baum managed to keep his New York architectural office open throughout the Great Depression. The Architectural League of New York raised funds to support unemployed draftsmen and architects. Baum’s office was one of the sites selected to employ these individuals. The projects often consisted of producing measured drawings of historic buildings. During the early 1920s, Baum was involved in the physical restoration and photographic documentation of historic buildings and wrote articles concerning preservation.²¹

In 1929, *Good Housekeeping* magazine enlisted Baum to serve as their architectural consultant. He contributed to the magazine by writing various articles and serving on juries for contests.²² Baum’s association with *Good Housekeeping* led to work on three exhibition buildings for the 1933 Chicago World’s Fair and the 1939 New York World’s Fair.²³ Through federal programs, such as the Public Works Administration and the Works Projects Administration, initiated by President Roosevelt’s “New Deal” administration, Baum designed several public buildings including the Westside Y.M.C.A. in New York City and the Flushing Post Office in Flushing, New York.²⁴

Baum also performed institutional work during the Depression. Several buildings at his alma mater, Syracuse University, were designed by Baum, including the School of Medicine, Hendricks Memorial Chapel (with John Russell Pope), and the Maxwell School of Citizenship. He also designed buildings for Wells College, Middlebury College, and Hartwick College (with John Russell Pope). Baum

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collaborated with John Russell Pope on the Syracuse Memorial Hospital as well. In the late 1930s, Baum turned to commercial construction when he worked on two restaurants for the Stouffers who wanted to expand their chain of restaurants into New York City.²⁵ Baum received many honors and awards for his eclectic designs, and, in 1932, the American Institute of Architects honored him with the title of Fellow.²⁶ In June 1934, Syracuse University honored Baum with an honorary degree of Doctor of Fine Arts. Baum died unexpectedly at the age of 53 of a heart attack on December 14, 1939.²⁷

3. Original and subsequent owners: Owen Burns owned and constructed the El Vernona Hotel.²⁸ Due to the failed Florida land boom and the Great Depression, Prudence Bond Company, Incorporated of New York foreclosed on Owen Burns in the summer of 1930. The hotel sold to a subsidiary of the plaintiff company and subsequently to John Ringling in federal court foreclosure proceedings on December 1, 1930.²⁹ At the death of Ringling in December 1936, the hotel became part of John Ringling's estate, most of which was pledged to the State of Florida.³⁰ In settling the estate, Ringling's nephew, John Ringling North, and the estate attorney, Leonard Bisco, received the hotel as payment (along with the circus, land, and other assets) for their executor and legal fees. They formed a new corporation, Ringling Enterprises, to accept the remaining Ringling assets and to handle the final settlement of the estate.³¹ John Ringling North closed the hotel in 1957.³²

According to the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, the Arvida Corporation purchased the former hotel from John Ringling North in 1959.³³ The following year, in May 1960, Trail Development Corporation purchased the building with the intention of reopening it as an accommodation for senior citizens. Arvida retained the rights to the name of the John Ringling Hotel for possible future use.³⁴ In 1964, Trail Development Corporation, under the leadership of president W. H. Robinson, opened a retirement center in the former hotel and changed the name to the John Ringling Towers.³⁵ The John Ringling Towers closed in 1980.³⁶

In 1981, Gardinier Resorts Corporation purchased the John Ringling Towers along with neighboring land holding the Burns Realty Company-Karl Bickel House.³⁷ In 1984, Gardinier Resorts sold the property to the Med-Dev and Masthead Corporations, which later gained the name of Ringling Joint Venture, and then Ringling Joint Venture II.³⁸ After Ringling Joint Venture II failed to pay on a consolidated land loan from Huntington National Bank, the bank foreclosed against the joint venture. Although the group sued the bank, the courts sided with the bank which gained title to the former hotel.³⁹ The bank, through its subsidiary First Sunset Development, Inc., donated the John Ringling Towers and part of the surrounding land to the nonprofit organization, The John Ringling Centre Foundation, provided that the Foundation could raise \$3 million of the funds needed to restore the John Ringling Towers before December 31, 1994.⁴⁰

The bank, perhaps not expecting the Foundation to meet the deadline, agreed to sell the property to C. Robert Buford. On December 24, 1994, the *Bradenton Herald* announced that the Foundation

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was only \$300,000 short to meet the requirements for the deadline.⁴¹ When the bank attempted to dissolve the deal with Buford, he sued the bank. Buford won control of the eight acres adjacent to the John Ringling Towers in June 1996. When the Foundation failed to meet the deadlines for actual restoration work, Buford called for demolition of the John Ringling Towers according to the prior agreement between the Foundation, the City of Sarasota, and the bank.⁴² After a series of lawsuits, Buford won possession of the former hotel in October 1997.⁴³ In March 1998, the John Ringling Towers was condemned as “unsafe and a public nuisance.”⁴⁴ Demolition started within the week and was completed on June 10, 1998.

4. Builder, contractor, suppliers: In 1926, the *Sarasota Herald* credited the following individuals and firms for the construction of the hotel:

Dwight James Baum, architect, The Burns Construction Co., Builders, Logan Co., of Louisville furnished the wrought iron, The Evansville Planing Mill Co., of Evansville, Indiana furnished some of the cabinet work, although most of it was done by the Burns Construction Co., in their own shops. J.J. Davis and Son put in all of the mechanical work, the ventilation, plumbing, steam fitting and electrical wiring. The elevators were furnished by Kessler and Heck of Chicago.⁴⁵

Triana, Jacintol Flores of Seville, Spain manufactured paving tiles used on the front terrace of the hotel.⁴⁶ The colored stencils on the beamed ceilings of the lobby and the dining room were painted by Robert Webb. According to David C. Weeks in *Ringling: The Florida Years, 1911-1936*, the paintings in the El Vernona were “among his finer works.”⁴⁷ Webb also painted various projects at Ca’d’Zan, including the ceiling of the court which resembles the work completed at the El Vernona.⁴⁸ In 1962, Webb, who was supervising the painting phase of the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg, returned to clean and restore some of the original painting at Ca’d’Zan.⁴⁹ According to a historic photograph from the Syracuse University Library, Department of Special Collections, a sign with the advertisement “Pogany and Webb” was draped across the front of the still under-construction building.⁵⁰ Although other sources did not mention any work of Willy Pogany’s in connection with the El Vernona Hotel, Pogany did paint the *Dancers of the Nations* panels which were installed on the ballroom ceiling at Ca’d’Zan. Pogany is perhaps better known as an illustrator of children’s books and a set designer for the Metropolitan Opera and for Ziegfeld productions.⁵¹

Designer Norman Bel Geddes fashioned the interior plan, layout, and furniture design for the M’Toto Room night club which opened on December 23, 1944. When John Ringling North converted the former lounge to the night club, murals with an ocean motif were painted on the night club’s walls. According to the *Sarasota News*, the murals were painted by a New York artist who painted the murals at the Cafe Society Uptown and Downtown.⁵² A later interview with Robert Carr, son of the 1940s hotel manager, stated that:

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In the makeover of the M'Toto Room, Anton Refregier - an artist and illustrator for the "New Yorker" - had been brought down to do a mural and many of the celebrities of the era can be identified. "I used to help him with simple things, a turtle, little fish."⁵³

Anton Refregier appears to have been the muralist who painted the ocean scenes in the M'Toto Room before it opened on December 23, 1944.

5. Original plans and construction: Designed in the Mediterranean Revival style, the El Vernona featured a square plan with the upper stories wrapped around an interior courtyard. At a cost of approximately \$750,000 to \$800,000, construction on the hotel lasted about one year.⁵⁴ The building was virtually completed when an article "Beautiful Inn Rich in Design Will Make Bow," appeared in the *Sarasota Herald* on May 3, 1926. In a detailed physical description of the hotel, the reporter stated that,

There is so much life and color in the rich brownish golden tone of the stucco structure that it glows even on a cloudy day.

Dwight James Baum, the architect has conceived and designed this artistic creation in the purest Spanish type with necessary modern adaptations.⁵⁵

Although simple in exterior plan with features typical of the Mediterranean Revival style, the decorative elements, including an extensive use of imported tile, and the architect's attention to detail in the exceptional interior spaces made the hotel a Sarasota landmark. Early photographs commissioned by Dwight James Baum in the late 1920s reveal that the exterior of the hotel remained virtually unchanged until its demolition in June 1998. The photographs are available at Syracuse University Library, Department of Special Collections. It appears that original plans for the hotel have not survived. The historic appearance of the hotel is described in further detail in the historical context.

6. Alterations and additions: After the death of John Ringling in 1936, John Ringling North, as executor of the estate and administrator of the hotel, altered the character of the hotel. Although the exact date is unknown, North introduced the circus to the hotel in the late 1930s or early 1940s. With the circus acts which were performed in the main dining room, trapezes, flying rings, and tight and slack wires were rigged from the ceiling beams for the performances. The chandelier, with the use of a pulley system, was cranked to one side, and the central fountain, which had been imported from Spain in 1926, was removed because it occupied too much space and endangered the performers. A large steel "elephant ring," to which small elephants were reportedly tied, was installed in the corner of the dining room.⁵⁶

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North further altered the hotel when he replaced the original lounge of the hotel with a night club which opened on December 23, 1944. Named the M'Toto Room, designer Norman Bel Geddes fashioned the interior plan, layout, and furniture design for the new night club. Murals with an ocean motif, apparently designed by Anton Refregier, an artist and illustrator for the *New Yorker*, covered the walls of the new night club.⁵⁷

After the hotel closed in 1957, it was eventually sold to Trail Development Corporation. In 1964, the company initiated a renovation of the building to convert the hotel into an eighty-four unit rental apartment building for the elderly and renamed the facility the John Ringling Towers. According to the January 31, 1965 edition of the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, "a tremendous amount of ripping out, repartitioning, replastering, painting and carpeting has gone into the old hotel since Robison [*sic*] started on it last year."⁵⁸ In this renovation, which occurred during 1964 and 1965, two hotel rooms were often combined into one apartment unit. In these cases, one of the original bathrooms would be converted to a kitchen. In the efficiency apartments, kitchen appliances were simply installed along one wall. Throughout the apartments, carpeting replaced the original checkerboard linoleum, and hollow core wood doors replaced original hotel room doors. Awning windows replaced many of the original metal casement windows, and window air conditioning units were installed in the individual apartments. Original staircases, except the grand staircase in the main lobby, were replaced with concrete and steel staircases in the renovation. The former northwest stairwell was enclosed with a self-service elevator which provided access to the second through the fifth floors. New circus theme murals were painted in the M'Toto Room, which was renamed The Elephant Lounge. A spraycrete coating, lauded as "waterproof," was applied to the exterior of the building.⁵⁹

In 1980, the John Ringling Towers closed, never to reopen again. Throughout the eighteen years of abandonment, the former hotel endured an extensive amount of vandalism. In 1986, the developers who owned the John Ringling Towers paid for the widening of U.S. 41 in exchange for an increased zoning density. This action resulted in the loss of the historic Queen palms and the historic tiled terrace and entrance steps.⁶⁰ In the ensuing years, vandals removed or destroyed numerous decorative elements including lighting fixtures, the chancel screen in the lobby, shutters, doors and door hardware, balustrades, and bathroom fixtures. One of the lighting fixtures, the crystal chandelier, which was formerly located in the dining room, was found in a home sold by the Gardinier family in 1984.⁶¹ Other decorative elements, such as the colorful imported tiles used throughout the building, were chipped, broken, and, in the case of the second floor fountain, sawn into pieces by vandals using chisels, pickaxes, and saws. The original architect's plaque on the front facade was removed. Although the exact date is unknown, a fire causing extensive damage to the interior finishes and equipment occurred in the kitchen during the mid-1990s. Prior to 1996, the original roofing tiles were removed, but a comparable, or even temporary covering, never replaced the original tiles. The removal of the roofing materials caused extensive water damage. Many of the removed tiles remained piled on the second floor loggia.⁶² Based on physical evidence and photographs from the mid-1980s, it is estimated that most of the vandalism and the alterations involved with the attempt to restore the

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building occurred during the late 1980s through the 1990s. Photographs taken during the 1980s are available at the Sarasota County Department of Historical Resources, Dickinson Studios in Sarasota, and in local newspaper articles concerning the former hotel.

B. Historical Context:

After visiting Sarasota several times, John and Mable Ringling purchased the home of Charles Thompson, Palms Elysian, in 1911. In the years before World War I, John Ringling spent his winters in Sarasota with the rest of the year following and managing the family circuses in conjunction with his brothers. Ringling was also busy with other business interests, including railroads and oil leases, which kept his attention focused outside of Sarasota. At the end of World War I, the remaining brothers combined the Ringling Bros. and the Barnum & Bailey Circuses which had been operating separately. With a single crew of experienced managers and his brother Charles devoting all of his time to the combined shows, John Ringling turned his attention to investment in Sarasota.⁶³

His first purchase was the Yacht and Automobile Club along with which came a string of lots on the Cedar Point peninsula that adjoined land held by Owen Burns. Burns had planned to build a hotel on his land, but with a lack of financing during the war years, the plan never came to fruition. Soon after the purchase, John Ringling and Owen Burns initiated a business relationship which would prove profitable throughout the Florida land boom of the 1920s. Owen Burns arrived in Florida in 1910 after making his fortune marketing metal home savings banks throughout the country. He invested in property in Sarasota by purchasing all of the holdings of J. Hamilton Gillespie and the Florida Mortgage and Investment Company which comprised approximately 75 percent of the land in Sarasota. To manage that property, he formed the Burns Realty Company, and, in 1911, organized the Citizens Bank of Sarasota, which later became the First National Bank.⁶⁴ Owen Burns owned several other businesses, including the Burns Concrete Products Company (cement block manufacturers) and the Burns Dredging Company.⁶⁵ As a well-respected developer, Burns was an established leader in the Sarasota business community, a necessity for Ringling who was considered an outsider in the social circles of Sarasota. To Burns, an association with Ringling promised a string of future projects with corresponding profits. In addition, Ringling provided a link to the monied Northern classes into which the business community of Sarasota hoped to tap.⁶⁶ Ringling was the “front man” in the association with the financing and ideas, while Burns “was to be the agent for realizing much of the program.”⁶⁷ The two agreed that “Sarasota’s future (and their own) lay in resort development for the moderately rich winter visitor and settler.”⁶⁸

During the 1920s, numerous tourists and new residents arrived in Florida and Sarasota to take advantage of the Florida land boom. During the first six months of 1925 alone, \$19 million in real estate transfers occurred in the city which contained only 5,500 residents.⁶⁹ When Ringling and Burns’ real estate venture incorporated, Ringling was named as president, his wife as a vice-president,

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and Burns, with a 25 percent interest, as a vice-president and treasurer. The charter of John Ringling Estates, Inc. included electric power and water services, hotels, golf courses and steamboats which would be essential for a resort.⁷⁰ Apparently from the start, the Sarasota community hoped the two would build a resort on the mainland, but Ringling intended to develop along the keys. His plans, under the Ringling Isles Corporation, included development of the islands, a causeway from the mainland, a great hotel, and shops on St. Armands, Lido, and Longboat Keys. During this period, Burns dredged to form land for development along the bay and throughout the keys, handled all of the island development, and built the Ringling Causeway from the mainland to St. Armands and Lido Keys. Burns also constructed numerous buildings through his construction company including his own El Vernona Apartments, the bungalows along Burns Court, and the new Ringling home, Ca'd'Zan, which was designed by New York architect Dwight James Baum.⁷¹

Baum first visited Sarasota around 1922, at the bequest of John and Mable Ringling, who hired him to design Ca'd'Zan.⁷² After collaborating with Baum on the construction of Ca'd'Zan, Burns hired Baum to design an office complex for Burns' business interests on the corner of Seventh Street and Broadway Avenue (now First Street and U.S. 41/Tamiami Trail). The office building, completed by May 1925, initially housed the Burns Realty Company, the Burns Supply Company, and the John Ringling Estates office.⁷³ Recognizing the potential of the Florida land boom which was just starting, Baum decided to open an office in Burns' real estate office in Sarasota while still maintaining his practice in New York. Baum would work closely with Burns throughout the next few years as Baum designed Burns' hotel and several residences, including Burns' own house, for the Ringling Isles Corporation on St. Armands.⁷⁴

To further the development along the keys, Ringling invited rail and hotel associates to visit and consult with him concerning the construction of the hotel. Ringling, in consultation with the Ritz Carlton Hotel Corporation, chose Longboat Key as the site for the new Ringling Ritz Carlton. According to Weeks, "Ringling curtly informed Burns that the idea of a hotel on the mainland was not feasible. Burns was not convinced; he determined to go ahead on his own."⁷⁵

Owen Burns commissioned Dwight James Baum to design the hotel he wanted to construct on the mainland. The hotel, erected north of the real estate office along Broadway Avenue, "the gateway of the celebrated Tamiami Trail into Sarasota," was located only three blocks from downtown Sarasota.⁷⁶ The hotel and the office complex were constructed on dredged land which was leveled by mule teams. Both buildings faced Banana Avenue, which in the 1920s was renamed Broadway Avenue in order to make Sarasota appear more cosmopolitan.⁷⁷ The development along Broadway, which Burns spearheaded, shifted the concentration of construction from the commercial buildings erected on Main Street to the Sarasota bayfront, north of North Palm Avenue.⁷⁸

Construction of the hotel commenced in mid-1925, around the time that the office complex was nearing completion. At a cost of approximately \$750,000 to \$800,000, construction on the hotel

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lasted approximately one year.⁷⁹ The building was virtually completed when an article, "Beautiful Inn Rich in Design Will Make Bow," which ran in the *Sarasota Herald* on May 3, 1926, predicted an opening by the first of June. Probably because tourism during the summer was virtually nonexistent, the opening was delayed until September. The reporter received a tour through the almost finished hotel and described, at length, the appearance of the hotel. According to the reporter,

there is so much life and color in the rich brownish golden tone of the stucco structure that it glows even on a cloudy day.

Dwight James Baum, the architect has conceived and designed this artistic creation in the purest Spanish type with necessary modern adaptations; a type of architecture particularly well suited to the geographical and climatic conditions of Florida. The thick walls with a concrete roof under the glowing old Spanish tiles, the heavy material of the wrought iron balconies, the gay colors that decorate the hand hewn heavy timber of the wooden balconies and latticed screen doors, the rough texture of the golden brown exterior and the softer tones of the interior, richly embellished with wainscotting [sic] of rare old Spanish and Tunis tiles, all bespeak the best period of Spanish architecture.

Two thirds of the rooms have balconies or porches. The porches, like the floors throughout the lobby, dining rooms and lounge have flat tile floors with insets of color that are beautiful and decorative. There is no wood in the building except the doors and frames. The entrance doors to the shops on the ground floor and the main entrance doors to the hotel are of hand hewn wood painted with Spanish colors, brilliant reds, greens, blues, and yellow. The inside doors are of heavy, plain walnut, with a beautiful dull finish and shutter ventilators of the most modern type forming the upper part for the warmer weather. These of course can be closed in cool weather or whenever desired. The frames for the screens are all of ornamented wood painted with rich Spanish colors. There are 41 wrought iron balconies and innumerable wooden ones.

Everything is Spanish except one Adams room, the ladies lounge. Entering the spacious lobby with its lofty ceiling, the Spanish tile wainscotting [sic] and the wrought iron railing catch the eye at first glance. Looking up one sees prows of Spanish galleons jut out from the pillars near the beamed ceiling. These are highly ornamented and gilded. Beautiful Duretto doors, copies of old Spanish doors, divide the lobby from the adjacent rooms on other [sic] side, which will be occupied by offices and shops. Wrought iron lanterns illuminate the lobby and entrance hall and all of the electric fixtures throughout the rooms are wrought iron candle fixtures drilled into the walls, very picturesque and so remarkably antiqued and patterned that even a connoisseur might easily be deceived and believe them to be old lanterns and lamps imported from Spain. Passing through the entrance hall and lobby the main diningroom [sic] is reached through arches, and, upon entering the vast room 52 by

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52 feet with a height of 26 feet, a feeling of restful, perfect proportion and old world beauty takes possession of the beholder. A Spanish tile fountain with a Spanish pedestal surmounted by a large urn for flowers stands in the center of this attractive room. Leaded art glass casts a reflection over the lovely colors of the tile in the fountain and floor and the gates which separate this room from the lobby are painted and antiqued so that the whole effect is as truly Spanish as anything outside of Spain could ever be. All of the woodwork, wrought iron, Spanish and Tunis tile used in the fountain and for the wainscotting [sic] and the pedestal and urn have been imported directly from Spain. This is also true of the wonderfully colored roof tiles.

The Spanish and Tunis tiles used in the wainscotting [sic] on the main floor and stairway are in greens, blues and yellows glazed and blending most artistically with the leaded art glass and the wrought iron candle stick holders and all of the small hardware; the hinges and handles for the doors. Even the screws for these are antiqued and of a certain kind. . . . Every detail has been worked out with great care and the best of workmanship and material are easily discernable everywhere. The wrought iron gates deserve special mention. The patterns are simple but beautiful and they add greatly to the charm of the interior wherever used. Pecky cypress forms the beamed ceilings for the lobby and the smaller diningroom [sic]. This will be highly decorated with colored stencils. . . .

. . . There is a real roof garden with an arcaded piazza and a fountain, a winding stone stairway and a place for dancing. Here gayly colored awnings and tables will be surrounded by the dancers, who may have refreshments served between dances.⁸⁰

Glass-topped, black marble cases served as reception desk counters which held an extensive collection of cigars available to be purchased by guests.⁸¹ The hotel featured five floors with a sixth floor occupied by two "bungalow apartments" separated by a roof garden for a total of 136 rooms in all (later totals claimed 150 rooms).⁸² The view, stated as the "most lovely in all Florida⁸³" included that of the beach behind the hotel.⁸⁴ Steam heat, baths, and running ice water were available in each room. The May 1926 article continues by describing the rooms and service facilities:

Great variety in the arrangement of the rooms and balconies is intriguing and interesting. The kitchens, bakery, vegetable room, store rooms, meat house, fish box and boiler room are well worth a special visit. Equipped with the very newest and best system for each of these, there is nothing lacking to assist in every way with perfect service and comfort.⁸⁵

The kitchens featured mechanical ventilators, an ice plant, and a refrigeration, steam heat, and hot water system which was run by an oil burner. The following individuals and firms given credit for creating,

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this beautiful new hotel, which is such an ornament and pride to Sarasota, are; Dwight James Baum, architect, The Burns Construction Co., Builders, Logan Co., of Louisville furnished the wrought iron, The Evansville Planing Mill Co., of Evansville, Indiana furnished some of the cabinet work, although most of it was done by the Burns Construction Co., in their own shops. J.J. Davis and Son put in all of the mechanical work, the ventilation, plumbing, steam fitting and electrical wiring. The elevators were furnished by Kessler and Heck of Chicago.⁸⁶

The colored stencils on the beamed ceilings of the lobby and the dining room were painted by Robert Webb. According to Weeks, the paintings in the El Vernona were “among his finer works.”⁸⁷ Webb also painted various projects at Ca’d’Zan, including the ceiling of the court which resembles the work completed at the El Vernona.⁸⁸

Owen Burns selected Harry C. Griswold as the first manager of the hotel. Griswold was described in contemporary accounts as the “veteran hotel operator of New York and Chicago, who is making the hotel the rendezvous of Sarasota’s most prominent winter visitors.”⁸⁹ Griswold had served as the manager of the Grand Pacific Hotel in Chicago, the Marseille and Legnori Hotels in New York City, the Tourraine Hotel in Buffalo, and the Narragansett in Providence. Under the leadership of Harry Griswold, a brochure was produced enumerating the amenities of the El Vernona. The brochure, entitled “El Vernona, ‘Aristocrat of Beauty,’ Sarasota Florida,” included a description of the hotel, sketches, and pictures along with glowing reports of the climate and charm of Sarasota. The brochure lauded the hotel as entirely fire proof, with an overall design praised for avoiding the use of interior rooms by the creation of a courtyard, “perfect for ventilation and illumination.”⁹⁰ The brochure continued by describing the dining room in the following way:

A massive ceiling of hewn and carved beams is supported by a colonnade of stone pillars and beneath a square skylight in the center stands a fountain, which was brought from Spain in its entirety. When shades of evening fall, colored lights play upon the tumbling water and the crystal jets reflect the rays in a kaleidoscope of rarest brilliance.⁹¹

Prior to its informal opening on Labor Day, September 6, 1926, other articles appeared in the *Sarasota Herald*. In one, dated August 31, 1926, the dining room, praised as “pretentious,” was described as,

one of the most elaborate in the south and nothing quite like it has ever been built. The mammoth chandelier from the John Jacob Astor mansion in the very center of the ceiling of this wonderful dining hall is not the least of its attractions while around the sides are bronze bracketed miniature chandeliers which were installed at an immense expenditure of money and add greatly to the beauty of the room.⁹²

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This dining room was the site of a lavish formal opening ball on New Year's Eve in 1926. On January 1, 1927, the opening gala was hailed as

an evening of pleasure which will remain with [the attendees] through life as an outstanding event. The setting of the occasion was splendid, its personnel was fine and worthy, the catering was superb, and the entertainment was a real joy. Long live El Vernona.⁹³

Harry Griswold was highly praised for organizing the entire event. However, "due to illness," he returned north the following April, and Owen Burns, III, nephew of Owen Burns, assumed management of the hotel. The hotel developed into the most popular gathering spot for the Sarasota elite. During the first season that it was open, the New York Giants even used the hotel as their spring training headquarters. The tourist season lasted approximately three months from late December, which the El Vernona marked by an extravagant New Year's Eve party, to late March.⁹⁴

Burns poured most of his energy and personal fortune into the construction, furnishing, and management of the El Vernona. Simultaneously, Ringling worked to fund and erect his Ritz Carlton Hotel on Longboat Key. He intended to finance \$400,000 himself while having investors match that amount. Designed by Warren and Wetmore of New York, the hotel was to open on December 1, 1925.⁹⁵ Unfortunately, investors, panicked by the decline of the Florida land boom, did not finance the hotel as intended. Despite the lack of subscriptions, Ringling initiated construction, and Burns agreed, in writing, that their real estate corporation would finance completion of the hotel.⁹⁶ As construction continued on the hotel without the public financing, Burns grew increasingly uncomfortable with Ringling's transfer of funds from the financially solvent Ringling Isles to the ailing hotel. In one move, Ringling "loaned" the corporation \$700,000, thereby mortgaging to himself all of the real property of the corporation. Burns viewed this move as a way to underwrite loans to the hotel until the real estate firm failed. At that time, Ringling could foreclose on the mortgage, and take possession of all of the corporation's assets, including Burns' 25 percent interest.⁹⁷

Meanwhile, Burns, whose money was invested heavily in land, both independently and through the Ringling Isles Corporation, started liquidating his assets in order to keep the El Vernona Hotel open when it started faltering.⁹⁸ However, this attempt to save the hotel failed. In the summer of 1930, Prudence Bond Company, Incorporated of New York, which held the mortgage to the hotel, brought foreclosure proceedings against Owen Burns. On November 15, 1930, the John Wanamaker Company of New York, which had originally sold Burns the furniture for the hotel for \$88,000, regained possession of the furniture at auction for a bid of \$50,000. At the same time, the newspaper announced that "sale of the hotel on Brodway [sic] is slated for Monday, Dec. 1, between 11 a. m. and 2 p. m. in foreclosure proceedings brought by the Prudence Co., Inc., of New York."⁹⁹

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The hotel was sold in federal court foreclosure proceedings on December 1, 1930, for \$125,000 to a subsidiary of the plaintiff company, Prudence Bond Company, Inc.¹⁰⁰ Samuel Gumpertz, a friend of Ringling, had joined associates in New York to form the Prudence Bond Company and had opened their Sarasota office.¹⁰¹ Although a subsidiary of Prudence Bond Company purchased the mortgage to the hotel,¹⁰² John Ringling was the new owner of the hotel.¹⁰³ Ringling changed the name of their real estate enterprise and attempted to dismiss Burns as vice-president. Although in 1930, Burns was still listed in the Sarasota City Directory as the Vice President-Secretary of John Ringling Estates, Inc., his attempts to block Ringling eventually failed.¹⁰⁴ These actions initiated a long series of court battles between the two former associates.¹⁰⁵ According to the article announcing the purchase of the hotel by the subsidiary of Prudence Bond Company, attorneys believed that the El Vernona would reopen early in the new year.¹⁰⁶ The hotel did indeed reopen, but under the name of the John Ringling Hotel. Although Ringling's Ritz Carlton had failed, he now had a hotel in Sarasota for a fraction of the cost.

Financial troubles plagued Ringling after the decline of the Florida land boom. He managed to disguise his problems by constantly moving money from investment to investment and through well-timed promotional events such as the relocation of the circus winter quarters to Sarasota in 1927. Through this action, Ringling gained his reputation as the savior of Sarasota. The city already suffered from falling land prices and decreasing construction due to the decline of the Florida land boom. The relocation of the circus winter quarters meant new jobs to construct and work at the winter quarters and increased tourism from winter visitors to the site. As a result, Sarasota became synonymous with the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus as well as the whole circus subculture. However, the relocation of the circus did not renew interest in the local real estate market or in the Ritz Carlton as Ringling had hoped, and his financial affairs continued to decline.¹⁰⁷

In 1929, Ringling decided to purchase the American Circus Corporation, but lacked all of the funds needed to do so. He signed a personal promissory note unsecured by any collateral for the \$1.7 million which he lacked. The six month note, arranged with Central Hanover Trust Company of New York, was endorsed by New York Investors, a subsidiary of Prudence Bond Company. Later, a subsidiary of New York Investors purchased the loan from Central Hanover Trust Company without Ringling's knowledge, thereby giving the company full control over the circus note. When the note came due, New York Investors agreed to extend the note with the provision that Ringling pay the interest and reduce the principal by \$200,000 per year. In addition, half of the stock in the newly acquired American Circus Corporation was held in trust by New York Investors. When Ringling could not meet the first payment of interest and principal due in September 1930, he borrowed another \$200,000 from New York Investors, signing two substantial New Jersey property mortgages.¹⁰⁸

At the time that another interest payment fell due on the circus note and the New Jersey property mortgages in May 1932, Ringling contracted blood poisoning. Newspapers publicized the rumors

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that Ringling was seriously ill. Although the infection was not that serious, it did require surgery. Ringling could not pay the installment, and, due to his illness, could not maneuver or defend his holdings. The creditors chose not to apply any of the money from the mortgages to the overdue interest and declared the circus loan in default. New York Investors threatened to close down the circus with a foreclosure. With that threat, Ringling signed away his assets in July 1932. The Ringling partnership, which had always owned the Ringling circus, dissolved, and a Delaware corporation which kept the Ringling Bros. name was established in its place. However, New York Investors controlled the corporation, and Ringling was forced to sign a new circus note, pledging most of his assets as collateral. The investment company also retained the right to dispose of any Ringling property, (even those not pledged as collateral, including the Sarasota properties), whether or not the note fell into default. As heirs to his brothers' assets, Ringling's former partners, Emily (his sister-in-law) and Aubrey (his niece), numbered among the directors of the new corporation. Ringling was retained as president in title only, and Samuel Gumpertz, Ringling's former friend who had been associated with Prudence Bond Company, became general manager of the circus. In addition, New York Investors gained power of attorney for his interest in eight other corporations and, through the formation of the Rembrandt Corporation, gained control of his art collection.¹⁰⁹

In December 1932, Ringling was informed that he had no power to make any commitments in the name of the circus. On the same day, he suffered a severe thrombosis, which left him partially paralyzed on the right side of his body. Throughout his remaining years, he experienced several more such attacks and remained under the constant care of a nurse.¹¹⁰ In November 1933, Ringling's principal creditors, New York Investors and its subsidiary, Allied Owners, filed for bankruptcy, and court appointed receivers assumed the management of their affairs. All of Ringling's assets which were pledged as collateral, including the museum and art collection, were placed in jeopardy with the bankruptcy. With the knowledge that Ringling had used the art museum and collection as collateral, Sarasota city officials filed tax liens against the property, in part to protect against foreclosure of the museum and disbursement of the art collection.¹¹¹

During the five years in which New York Investors managed the circus, no dividends were paid to the shareholders despite grossing over \$20 million. Without the income, Ringling, desperate for money to pay his long line of creditors, filed numerous lawsuits between 1934 and 1936 (including thirty in New York).¹¹² One of those lawsuits consisted of a new case against Owen Burns. According to the October 17, 1935 issue of the *Sarasota Herald*,

C.L. McKaig, attorney, appointed receiver by Federal Judge Alexander Akerman in the five-year-old case of the Prudence company, New York, against the Burns Realty company, Sarasota, stated today that he has taken possession of certain articles which a recent order of Judge Akerman directed him to secure and has stored the articles in a warehouse here. The articles consist of motors chandeliers, ets., which it is alleged were in the list of assets of the El Vernona hotel in 1930 when the Prudence company

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foreclosed a mortgage against the hotel in which action the Burns Realty company was defendant. Recently Ringling Isles, Inc., of which John Ringling is the head, and claiming to be present owners of the hotel, petitioned Judge Akerman for an order directing that Owen Burns of the Burns Realty company, be cited for contempt of court for withholding these articles at the time of the foreclosure of the mortgage on the hotel building. The petition recites that all of the articles were included in the mortgage foreclosure on the hotel building, and the fact that they were in Mr. Burns' possession has only recently come to light, it was said. The order of Judge Akerman directs Mr. Burns to appear in federal court in Tampa on November 4 to answer to the contempt citation.¹¹³

Many of Ringling's former friends and associates, including Samuel Gumpertz and John Kelley, the circus attorney, as well as family members abandoned him to side with his adversaries. Early in 1934, another associate, Richard Fuchs who was Ringling's personal assistant for fifteen years, left Ringling to work for New York Investors.¹¹⁴ Despite the loss of former friends and business associates, Ringling did acquire a few new friends such as Karl Bickel who purchased the former real estate office next to the John Ringling Hotel in 1933. Bickel, the retired president of United Press and United Feature Syndicate, and his wife, Madira, renovated the office complex into a private residence and planted a large walled garden and constructed a private library to the west, behind the house and the John Ringling Hotel. Bickel would periodically visit Ringling at Ca'd'Zan during his final years¹¹⁵. Ringling also grew increasingly reliant upon his relatives, the North family. John Ringling North, Ringling's nephew, who was loyal despite Ringling's growing distrust of him, stepped in to take Fuchs' place. In his final years, Ringling lived on the verge of bankruptcy, not because he had lost his wealth, but because his wealth was tied up in assets and his assets were pledged as collateral.¹¹⁶ Ringling, beset by financial troubles, died of pneumonia on December 2, 1936.¹¹⁷

At the time of his death, few of his remaining Sarasota friends attended the funeral. Hazen Titus, who had managed the John Ringling Hotel during the 1930s, along with the North family, were the only mourners from Sarasota who attended his funeral.¹¹⁸ Another of Ringling's former business associates, Owen Burns, died within the year. On August 28, 1937, Burns died at home of an apparent heart attack. At the time of his death, he was the owner and operator of the Tre-Ripe Citrus Products Company, a guava preserving company.¹¹⁹

In Ringling's May 1934 will, he named his sister, Ida North, and nephew, John Ringling North, as executors of his estate, and nephews, John and Henry North, and nephew-in-law, Randolph Wadsworth, as trustees of the museum. In a codicil to the will signed in November 1935, Ringling barred his nephews, John and Henry, from receiving anything from his estate. The codicil further stipulated that his sister, Ida North, was to receive no more than \$5,000 per year from the estate. Ringling intended for the State of Florida to receive the rest of his estate. However, the codicil never changed the executors or trustees listed in the 1934 will, and the document was not sent to probate

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for eighteen months. By that time, the executors and trustees established in his 1934 will were already recognized by the court and acting on behalf of the estate. Because of the codicil, his intent to have the Norths as the executors of his estate was bitterly disputed for ten years. John Ringling North, as the court-recognized acting executor, was immediately barraged by seventy-one claims against Ringling's estate.¹²⁰

Creditors posed an immediate threat to the John Ringling Hotel. Within a week after the recognition of the executors, speculators sought to purchase all of the outstanding tax sale certificates against Ringling's Sarasota real estate and the Ringling Isles Corporation. One attempted to force the sale of the John Ringling Hotel, which was worth nearly a quarter of a million dollars, under a tax sale certificate for \$7,000. The executors raised the \$7,000 by selling one of the draglines belonging to the Ringling Isles Corporation and by raising money through one of the short line railroads owned by Ringling. After this incident, the executors filed two suits on behalf of the estate to halt the further sale of tax sale certificates.¹²¹ Part of the problem in settling the estate resulted from the lack of adequate records maintained by Ringling. In many cases, clear titles identifying his assets did not exist. In an inventory and appraisal of Ringling's total assets performed in the year after his death, appraisers found paintings worth nearly \$50,000 hanging or stored at the John Ringling Hotel.¹²² Ringling, who had used his fourth floor suite to entertain guests, utilized his art and antique collection throughout the public rooms as well as his private rooms in the hotel.¹²³

Allied Owners and New York Investors, Ringling's creditors on the circus note, had entered receivership and at least twelve officials were under federal indictment for irregularities in corporate affairs when Ringling died. After extensive negotiations with the executors of the estate, Manufacturers Trust Company, which held another note of Ringlings and to whom Allied Owners and New York Investors were indebted, agreed to refinance the circus loan and return control of the circus to the Ringling family.¹²⁴ John Ringling North was named as general manager and executive vice president of the circus. With the circus making a profit again and the John Ringling Hotel fully functional and profitable, the estate steadily improved its financial viability.¹²⁵

North, as acting executor, had administered the John Ringling Hotel since Ringling's death in 1936. He reopened the hotel in 1937 after it had been closed for two years during the height of the Depression.¹²⁶ When the Norths contacted him for advice, Martin Sweeney, owner of the Whitehall Hotel in Palm Beach, recommended Charles Carr as a new manager for the John Ringling Hotel. Carr, at the time, served as manager of food services for the Whitehall Hotel and the Everglades Club. Carr accepted the position and moved to Sarasota to manage the hotel which officially reopened on New Year's Eve in 1937.¹²⁷ Carr, listed as resident manager in 1938, occupied the two sixth floor penthouses with his wife and five children.¹²⁸

Prior to Ringling's death, the hotel had retained the 1920s aura of an elegant, refined establishment. When John Ringling North reopened it in 1937, he realized that the hotel, especially with the lingering

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effects of the Depression, needed to create a niche in which to draw visitors. North introduced the circus to the hotel. Famous circus performers such as aerialist Penito Del Oro, Captain William Heyer with his horse Starless Night, and clown Emmitt Kelly enacted their routines in the main dining room, which was called the Fountain Room.¹²⁹ Trapezes, flying rings, and tight and slack wires were rigged from the ceiling beams for the performances. The chandelier, with the use of a pulley system, was cranked to one side, and the central fountain, which had been imported from Spain in 1926, was removed because it occupied too much space and endangered the performers. Small elephants were reportedly brought in through the back alley and tied to an “elephant ring” in the dining room. A seven-foot tall doorman in glittering blue and gold cutaway provided entrance to the hotel.¹³⁰

John Ringling North introduced several other changes to the hotel including the creation of a sidewalk cafe along Broadway and the opening of a night club in the hotel. Named the M'Toto Room, which reportedly meant “my beautiful darling” in an African language, the night club netted \$18,000 during the first fifteen weeks of business after its opening on December 23, 1944. Designer Norman Bel Geddes fashioned the interior plan, layout, and furniture design for the lounge. Geddes also performed work for the circus. Murals with an ocean motif were painted on the lounge's walls by the New York artist who painted the murals at the Cafe Society Uptown and Downtown.¹³¹ The new night club opened in the northeast corner of the hotel, where the cocktail lounge had been located. According to an interview of Robert Carr, son of 1940s hotel manager Charles Carr,

“My dad didn't like the M'Toto Room...It changed the character of the hotel. The lounge was a very elegant room with Roman columns and the cocktail hour at the Ringling was [an] incredible fashion show every day. We had violinists strolling around and fancy hors d'oeuvres. When John North converted it to a nightclub, that all changed and he installed banquettes and took out the Mediterranean flavor.”¹³²

The same interview with Robert Carr continues by stating that

in the makeover of the M'Toto Room, Anton Refregier - an artist and illustrator for the “New Yorker” - had been brought down to do a mural and many of the celebrities of the era can be identified. “I used to help him with simple things, a turtle, little fish.”¹³³

Thus, Anton Refregier appears to have been the muralist who painted the murals with the ocean motif in the M'Toto Room.

Despite the success of the circus and the circus theme in the hotel, family members Edith and Aubrey Ringling, as part owners with the Norths in the circus, ousted John Ringling North as general manager of the circus in 1943. After a disastrous fire in which the circus management was sued, full management of the circus eventually returned to John Ringling North by 1948.¹³⁴ According to

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Weeks, “by 1946 the circus came to mean John Ringling North, the man who restored the vigor and viability of that floundering giant.”¹³⁵ The hotel also became synonymous with the circus. In 1951, Cecil B. DeMille filmed the movie “The Greatest Show on Earth” in Sarasota. DeMille and the stars of the movie, including Betty Hutton, Dorothy Lamour, Cornel Wilde and Charlton Heston, stayed at the John Ringling Hotel. Throughout this period, the hotel received many famous visitors including Generals Omar Bradley, George Patton and Jonathan Wainwright, movie stars David Niven, Bette Davis, and Joan Fontaine, and Prince Rainier of Monaco when he was courting Grace Kelley. The Boston Red Sox also used the hotel as their spring training headquarters during the late 1940s.¹³⁶ The hotel flourished during its heyday in the 1940s and early 1950s.

In 1953, the hotel lost one of its major assets at the death of Charles Carr. His son, Jack Carr, managed the hotel for the following four years.¹³⁷ In January 1946, the executors of Ringling’s estate had announced that they were ready to convey the art museum and Ca’d’Zan to the State of Florida and that all requirements of the will and the 1937 legislation, which had accepted the donation, had been met. However, the large legal fees that the settlement of the estate had incurred remained. Additionally, major assets in which the State of Florida had inherited an interest had not been converted to cash for the trust fund which was to be administered for the benefit of the art collection. Over the following two years, the executors and their lawyers arrived at an agreement with the State of Florida in which John Ringling North and his lawyer, Leonard Bisco, received all of the remaining assets in lieu of their fees. They would settle all remaining claims against the estate, and pay the State of Florida the difference in value for the art collection’s trust fund. A new corporation, Ringling Enterprises, which was entirely owned by North and Bisco, received title for the remaining assets, apparently including the John Ringling Hotel, in exchange for a state-held mortgage for \$1.25 million to be paid into the trust. By 1957, when North closed the hotel, the remaining Ringling assets had been divided between the two with North apparently receiving the circus and the hotel, and Bisco claiming much of the island property.¹³⁸

Despite the post-World War II boom which spread through Florida and Sarasota, the closing of the hotel marked the end of prosperity for the building. The boom even served to destroy opportunity for the building with the demand for modernity and the increased need for better roadways to handle the growing population. In the same year that the hotel closed, the Tamiami Trail, which had originally been constructed in the late 1910s and early 1920s, was widened. In addition, the northern portion of the Tamiami Trail was to be connected to the southern portion by a new Bayfront Drive which swept along the bayfront and bypassed the Main Street connection.¹³⁹ The increased traffic, the new availability of land on the keys, and the construction boom decreased the demand for a 30-year-old hotel with small rooms and out-of-date mechanical systems. The hotel even lacked beach front access and air conditioning which made it impossible to operate during the summer months. The prospective buyer of the 1950s demanded a better deal.

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In 1959, Arvida Corporation, founded by Arthur Vining Davis, millionaire developer, purchased the John Ringling Hotel along with other land formerly owned by Ringling on Lido, Bird, Otter, Coon, and Longboat Keys, including the never completed Ritz Carlton Hotel. Arvida, which was interested mainly in developing the vacant land on the keys, initiated demolition of the Ritz Carlton on December 2, 1963.¹⁴⁰ Almost immediately, Arvida willingly contracted with a New Jersey company that wanted to buy the John Ringling Hotel.¹⁴¹ The New Jersey company, Trail Development Corporation, purchased the hotel in May 1960 for \$350,000 with the intentions of opening the building as an accommodation for senior citizens. In the agreement, Arvida retained the right to use the name of the John Ringling Hotel for their own possible future hotel.¹⁴² The loss of the hotel name, in combination with the 1960 relocation of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus winter quarters to Venice spelled the end of an era for Sarasota.¹⁴³

In April 1964, the Trail Development Corporation, under the leadership of president W.H. Robinson, initiated a renovation of the John Ringling Hotel. According to the article announcing the renovation, "General contractor E.E. (Gene) Simmons acquired the first city permit totaling \$25,000, which is understood as the cleanup and tearing-out segment in a far larger program."¹⁴⁴ By the following January, "a tremendous amount of ripping out, repartitioning, replastering, painting and carpeting has gone into the old hotel since Robison [*sic*] started on it last year."¹⁴⁵ The entire refurbishment, expected to take eighteen months, changed the building from a hotel of 150 rooms to a furnished rental apartment building of eighty-four units with the new name of the John Ringling Towers.¹⁴⁶ Model apartments included single room efficiencies and one and two bedroom units with a living and dining area. In January 1965, two room efficiencies were still in the planning stages.¹⁴⁷ Two hotel rooms were often combined into one apartment unit. In these cases, one of the original bathrooms would be converted to a kitchen. In efficiencies, kitchen appliances were simply installed along one wall. Throughout the apartments, carpeting replaced the original checkerboard linoleum, and hollow core wood doors replaced original hotel room doors. The remodeling also included new furniture and drapes as well as a spraycrete coating applied to the exterior which was lauded as making the building "waterproof." Awning windows replaced many of the original metal casement windows, and window air conditioning units were installed in the individual apartments. The old radiator system, which had been reconditioned, provided heat. Original staircases, except the grand staircase in the main lobby, were replaced with concrete and steel staircases in the renovation. In addition, a newly installed self-service elevator in a former northwest stairwell provided private access to the second through the fifth floors. According to resident manager Edna Lombardi, apartments would be finished on any floor that the tenant desired.¹⁴⁸

The public areas, such as the lobby and the dining room, were reopened to the public with little alteration other than new furniture.¹⁴⁹ Circus acts were staged for the reopening of the John Ringling Towers, but the circus acts were not to make a weekly appearance. In 1973, Thorpe Earp, manager of the John Ringling Towers, was "looking forward to the reopening of the lounge."¹⁵⁰ New circus-theme murals were painted in the M'Toto Room, which was renamed The Elephant Lounge. The

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India House Restaurant, owned by Saijan Sarna, operated in the former dining room of the hotel during the late 1970s. However, the restaurant did not survive with the impending close of the John Ringling Towers.

In 1980, the John Ringling Towers closed, and the building was left to slowly decay.¹⁵¹ Similarly, the neighboring Bickel residence, which was originally the Burns Realty Office, was left to ruin after Karl Bickel's death in 1972. Executors sold his home to the Cold Spring Development Corporation and the remainder of the property, including the gardens, to a land trust.¹⁵² While the groups debated future uses for the properties, the house and gardens remained vacant. In April 1981, Gardinier Resorts Corporation purchased a total of 5½ acres including the John Ringling Towers, the Bickel house, and other properties which stretched to the Sarasota bayfront for \$6.85 million. Gardinier Resorts Corporation was a subsidiary of Gardinier Inc., a French parent corporation whose president owned a house on Longboat Key.¹⁵³ Gardinier formed a partnership, called Ringling Associates, with local residential developer Jack Shire. In 1983, the Sarasota City Commission denied a rezoning petition that would have allowed Gardinier to build condominiums on the adjoining property.¹⁵⁴ The following February, Ringling Associates dissolved,¹⁵⁵ and Gardinier applied for and received a demolition permit for the site in March 1983.¹⁵⁶ At this time, the company apparently removed some fixtures from the hotel. The crystal chandelier located in the dining room of the John Ringling Towers was later found in a home sold by the Gardinier family in 1984.¹⁵⁷ However, the demolition of the former hotel did not occur.

In December 1984, Gardinier Resorts, Inc. sold the John Ringling Towers to the Med-Dev and Masthead corporations for \$8.5 million. The Ringling Joint Venture, as it came to be known, was composed of local attorneys Granville Crabtree and Albert Sanchez and real estate broker Neil Saunders as principals. The new owners, now with 11 acres, planned a luxury resort hotel and convention center which would "preserve important portions of the towers and maintain the Mediterranean Revival architecture" as well as retain the Bickel residence.¹⁵⁸ According to the spokeswoman for the group, the plans would conform to the City's downtown revitalization plan as well as to existing City codes and zoning ordinances.¹⁵⁹ However, within a year, the City denied Ringling Joint Venture's interpretation of the zoning code. The joint venture intended to renovate the John Ringling Towers into offices and retail stores, while the Bickel house would become a restaurant. In addition, the joint venture wanted to construct a seventy-five unit hotel and a 240 unit complex to be used as community housing for the elderly. The City believed that since each unit would have a kitchen, the elderly housing complex should be classified as conventional multi-family housing. The joint venture appealed the City's denial of their plans. The Circuit Court judge sided with the developers and allowed the maximum of 470 units for the site, in addition to the seventy-five unit hotel.¹⁶⁰

In January 1986, the Ringling Joint Venture requested that the City delay the execution of \$344,500 in bonds. The bonds, due January 21, were earmarked for road construction projects, including the

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widening of the segment of U.S. 41 in front of the John Ringling Towers between Palm Avenue and Second Street. The requested delay would last six months. Ringling Joint Venture agreed to pay the construction costs of the road projects in exchange for a more favorable density rezoning. Sarasota Quay, a retail and office complex, which was under construction south of the John Ringling Towers, also agreed to pay a portion of the construction costs. The City apparently agreed, if only to avoid major construction along U.S. 41 during the height of the tourist season.¹⁶¹ By December 1986, newspaper photographs in the *Sarasota Times* revealed a widened U.S. 41 resulting in the removal of the vegetation including the historic Queen palms and the historic tiled patio and entrance steps.¹⁶²

In 1986, Ringling Joint Venture became Ringling Joint Venture II, and, in 1988, received a consolidated land loan from Huntington National Bank in Columbus, Ohio. In June 1990, First Sunset Development Inc., a subsidiary of Huntington National Bank of Columbus, Ohio, foreclosed on the John Ringling Towers and the surrounding property against Ringling Joint Venture II, which owed the bank almost \$10 million. At the time, the bank intended to proceed with plans to construct the retirement center which was proposed for the western 8 acres of the site but wanted to explore further options for the former hotel and the Bickel house.¹⁶³ Despite a lawsuit filed by the joint venture against the bank, the courts found the bank to be the legal owner.¹⁶⁴ In an effort to explore further options for the John Ringling Towers and the Bickel house, the bank hired preservation consultant Donovan Rypkema, in collaboration with Elizabeth Jackson, to perform a feasibility study for the John Ringling Towers and the Bickel house. Their findings (in the report "Rehabilitation Strategy for the John Ringling Towers") suggested conveying the buildings to a nonprofit entity with eventual restoration as a mixed-use arts center possibly with additional space for educational and environmental nonprofit groups.¹⁶⁵

As a result of the report, a steering committee was formed in September 1991 by local citizens interested in preserving the John Ringling Towers. The committee, which later became the John Ringling Centre Foundation, spearheaded efforts starting the following July to raise money to start the rehabilitation of the former hotel into a cultural center named the John Ringling Centre. The bank pledged to donate the John Ringling Towers and the Bickel house to the Foundation. However, in exchange, the City of Sarasota had to approve a density increase for the planned retirement community which the bank intended to build adjacent to the two buildings. In addition, the bank agreed to donate \$500,000 to the rehabilitation project.¹⁶⁶ The bank received the zoning concessions, but the Foundation had to raise \$3 million of the total \$7 million required for restoration by December 1994, or the buildings could be sold or demolished.¹⁶⁷ On December 24, 1994, the *Bradenton Herald* announced that the Foundation lacked only \$300,000.¹⁶⁸ Believing that the Foundation would not make the deadline, the bank had agreed to sell the entire 11.26 acres to developer C. Robert Buford. On the day before the deal was finalized, Buford learned that the bank had donated the 3 acres with the John Ringling Towers and the Bickel house to the Foundation. When the bank attempted to renege on the deal with Buford, he sued the bank in 1995 and won control of the 8 acres adjacent to the John Ringling Towers and the Bickel house in June 1996. In the prior agreement between the

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Foundation, the City, and the bank, if restoration deadlines were not met, the John Ringling Towers could be demolished. When the deadlines for restoration were not met, Buford, as the new owner in the bank's place, called for demolition of the John Ringling Towers based upon the condition of the building.¹⁶⁹

After a series of lawsuits, Buford won possession of the John Ringling Towers and the Karl Bickel house in October 1997. The settlement between Buford and the Foundation "calls for Buford [to] 'use his best efforts to explore all possibilities for rehabilitation and restoration of the Towers' . . . [and] also includes a provision 'that the historic Karl Bickel House may be preserved and rehabilitated.'"¹⁷⁰ Both buildings had been formally listed in the National Register of Historic Places as the El Vernona Hotel-John Ringling Hotel and as the Burns Realty Company-Karl Bickel House on March 5, 1987. Despite the listing, vandals had destroyed many of the decorative details in the hotel which had made the hotel a unique Sarasota landmark.

In the years since 1980, vandals had removed or destroyed numerous decorative elements including lighting fixtures, the chancel screen in the lobby, shutters, doors and door hardware, balustrades, and bathroom fixtures. In addition, the colorful imported tile used throughout the building was chipped, broken, and, in the case of the second floor fountain, sawn into pieces by vandals using chisels, pickaxes, and saws. The original architect's plaque on the front facade was removed. Although the exact date is unknown, a fire causing extensive damage to the interior finishes and equipment occurred in the kitchen during the late 1990s. Prior to 1996, the original roofing tiles were removed, but a comparable, or even temporary, covering never replaced the original tiles. The removal of the roofing materials caused extensive water damage. Many of the removed tiles remained piled on the second floor loggia.¹⁷¹ Based on physical evidence and photographs from the mid-1980s, most of the vandalism and the alterations involved with the attempt to restore the building apparently occurred during the late 1980s through the 1990s. On the basis of the severe deterioration of the building and the failure to secure the building against vandals, vagrants, animals and pests, the City of Sarasota declared the former hotel "unsafe and a public nuisance" and issued a demolition permit in March 1998.¹⁷² Demolition started within the week and was completed June 10, 1998.

C. Endnotes:

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2. "Beautiful Inn Rich in Design Will Make Bow," *Sarasota Herald*, 3 May 1926, subject files, El Vernona Hotel, Sarasota County Division of Historical Resources, Sarasota.

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4. "New Hostelry One of Finest in Dixieland," *Sarasota Herald*, 31 August 1926, subject files, El Vernona Hotel, Sarasota County Division of Historical Resources, Sarasota.
5. See "Dwight Baum, One of Nation's Greatest Architects, Dead," *Syracuse(?) Evening Times*, 14 December 1939, subject files, Dwight James Baum, The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Archives, Sarasota; Robert H. Raynor, "Dwight James Baum, Architect 1886-1939" (M.Arch. thesis, University of Florida, 1976), 11; and Henry F. Withey and Elsie Rathburn Withey, *Biographical Dictionary of American Architects (Deceased)* (Los Angeles: Hennessey & Ingalls, Inc. 1970) 43, s.v. "Baum, Dwight James."
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7. Matlock Price, *The Work of Dwight James Baum Architect*, with a Foreword by Harvey Wiley Corbett, F.A.I.A. (New York: William Helburn, Inc., 1927), preface.
8. See Raynor, 1; Bernice Brooks Bergen, "Sarasota's Eclectic Architect," *Sarasota Times*, 15 May 1991, subject files, Dwight James Baum, The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Archives, Sarasota; and "Dwight Baum, One of Nation's Greatest Architects, Dead."
9. See David C. Weeks, *Ringling: The Florida Years, 1911-1936* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993), 99; Bergen, "Sarasota's Eclectic Architect"; and Raynor, 59.
10. Raynor, 52, 59-60.
11. See *Polk's Sarasota City Directory 1926* (Jacksonville: R.L. Polk & Co., 1926), Sarasota County Division of Historical Resources, Sarasota; *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, May 1925* (New York: Sanborn Map Company, May 1925), Sarasota County Division of Historical Resources, Sarasota; and Sarah Latham Kearns, "Burns Realty Company-Karl Bickel House [1983]," (hereinafter referred to as Burns-Bickel NRHP form), National Register of Historic Places nomination, [photocopy], subject files, Owen Burns, Sarasota County Division of Historical Resources, Sarasota.
12. Weeks, 100.

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13. Sarah Latham Kearns, "El Vernona Hotel-John Ringling Hotel [1983]," (hereinafter referred to as El Vernona NRHP form), National Register of Historic Places nomination, [photocopy], subject files, El Vernona Hotel/John Ringling Towers, Sarasota County Division of Historical Resources, Sarasota.
14. "Hotel El Vernona Most Distinctive in United States."
15. Ibid.
16. Kearns, El Vernona NRHP form.
17. Kearns, Burns-Bickel NRHP form.
18. Bergen, "Sarasota's Eclectic Architect."
19. Raynor, 104.
20. Weeks, 100.
21. Raynor, 32.
22. Ibid.
23. See Stadler, "Architect's Legacy: Durable and Desirable Homes"; and Raynor, 34-39.
24. Raynor, 39.
25. Ibid., 39,44,52.
26. Withey, 43.
27. "Dwight Baum, One of Nation's Greatest Architects, Dead."
28. See Weeks, 99; and "Hotel El Vernona Most Distinctive in United States."
29. "El Vernona Hotel Sold to N.Y. Firm," *Sarasota Herald*, 1 December 1930, subject files, El Vernona Hotel/John Ringling Towers, Sarasota County Division of Historical Resources, Sarasota; and "Burns Cited in El Vernona Suit," *Sarasota Herald*, 17 October 1935, subject files, El Vernona Hotel/John Ringling Towers, Sarasota County Division of Historical Resources, Sarasota.
30. Weeks, 251, 258.

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31. Ibid., 283-85.
32. "Ringling Hotel Sold for \$350,000 in Sarasota," *Tampa Tribune*, 20 May 1960, subject files, El Vernona Hotel/John Ringling Towers, Sarasota County Division of Historical Resources, Sarasota.
33. Lawrence Dame, "Ringling Hotel on Sale Option," *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, 15 October 1959, subject files, El Vernona Hotel/John Ringling Towers, Sarasota County Division of Historical Resources, Sarasota.
34. "Ringling Hotel Sold for \$350,000 in Sarasota."
35. See "Ringling Hotel to Undergo Refurbishing," *Sarasota Journal*, 6 April 1964, subject files, El Vernona Hotel/John Ringling Towers, Sarasota County Division of Historical Resources, Sarasota; Stan Moran, "Towers' Rental Apartments Open," *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, 31 January 1965, subject files, El Vernona Hotel/John Ringling Towers, Sarasota County Division of Historical Resources, Sarasota; and Dorothy Stockbridge, "Ringling Hotel - In It's Heyday Sarasotans Dined to Circus Frolics," *Sarasota Journal*, 14 January 1973, subject files, El Vernona Hotel/John Ringling Towers, Sarasota County Division of Historical Resources, Sarasota.
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39. See John Hielscher, "Fate of Ringling Towers in Hands of Ohio Bank," *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, 22 June 1990, subject files, El Vernona Hotel/John Ringling Towers, Sarasota County Division of Historical Resources, Sarasota; and Jack Gurney, "We're All to Blame for Towers' Plight?" *Sarasota Times*, 21 August 1991, subject files, El Vernona Hotel/John Ringling Towers, Sarasota County Division of Historical Resources, Sarasota.
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43. Bob Ardren, "Towers Keys Belong to Buford Now," *Siesta Key Pelican Press*, 18 December 1997, subject files, El Vernona Hotel/John Ringling Towers, Sarasota County Division of Historical Resources, Sarasota.
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48. Ibid., 122.
49. Melody Siplon, "Original Ringling Mansion Artist Returns to Refurbish His Work," *Sarasota News*, 23 April 1962, subject files, Robert Webb, The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Archives, Sarasota.
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52. A. J. Ruttenber, "Memories Fill Vacant M'Toto Room," *Sarasota News*, 24 January 1960, subject files, El Vernona Hotel/John Ringling Towers, Sarasota County Division of Historical Resources, Sarasota.
53. Pat Buck, "Sarasota, Growing Up," *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, 3 April 1994, subject files, El Vernona Hotel/John Ringling Towers, Sarasota County Division of Historical Resources, Sarasota.
54. "Hotel El Vernona Most Distinctive in United States."

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55. "Beautiful Inn Rich in Design Will Make Bow."
56. See Ruttenber, "Memories Fill Vacant M'Toto Room"; and Stockbridge, "Ringling Hotel - In It's Heyday Sarasotans Dined to Circus Frolics."
57. See Ruttenber, "Memories Fill Vacant M'Toto Room"; and Buck, "Sarasota, Growing Up."
58. Moran, "Towers' Rental Apartments Open."
59. See Ruttenber, "Memories Fill Vacant M'Toto Room"; Moran, "Towers' Rental Apartments Open"; and Stockbridge, "Ringling Hotel - In It's Heyday Sarasotans Dined to Circus Frolics."
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66. Weeks, 72-77.
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69. Ibid., 99.

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70. Ibid., 75.
71. Ibid., 99.
72. See Weeks, 99; Bergen, "Sarasota's Eclectic Architect"; and Raynor, 59.
73. See *Polk's*, 1926; *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map*, May 1925; and Kearns, Burns-Bickel NRHP form.
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76. "Hotel El Vernona Most Distinctive in United States."
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79. "Hotel El Vernona Most Distinctive in United States."
80. "Beautiful Inn Rich in Design Will Make Bow."
81. Renner, "Past Elegance, History 'Rest' in Hotel."
82. See "Beautiful Inn Rich in Design Will Make Bow"; and "Hotel El Vernona Most Distinctive in United States."
83. "Hotel El Vernona Most Distinctive in United States."
84. Buck, "Sarasota, Growing Up."
85. "Beautiful Inn Rich in Design Will Make Bow."
86. Ibid.
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89. See Weeks, 100; and "Hotel El Vernona Most Distinctive in United States."

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94. "El Vernona is Opened Today," *Sarasota Herald*, 1 December 1927, subject files, El Vernona Hotel/John Ringling Towers, Sarasota County Division of Historical Resources, Sarasota.
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101. Weeks, 87.
102. "El Vernona Hotel Sold to N.Y. Firm."
103. Weeks, 100, 226.
104. See Miller, 1930; and Dorothy Stockbridge-Pratt, "Burns' Legacy Lives on in City," *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, 14 December 1997, subject files, El Vernona Hotel/John Ringling Towers, Sarasota County Division of Historical Resources, Sarasota.
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106. "El Vernona Hotel Sold to N.Y. Firm."

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107. Weeks, 150-51.
108. Ibid., 232-36.
109. Ibid.
110. Ibid., 241-43.
111. Ibid., 244-45.
112. Ibid., 247.
113. "Burns Cited in El Vernona Suit."
114. Weeks, 246.
115. Kearns, Burns-Bickel NRHP form.
116. Ibid., 263.
117. Ibid., 254.
118. See Weeks, 257; and *Polk's*, 1936.
119. "Owen Burns Succumbs Suddenly at Home Here"; and *Polk's*, 1936.
120. Weeks, 251, 258.
121. Ibid., 259-60.
122. Ibid., 275.
123. Stockbridge, "Ringling Hotel - In It's Heyday Sarasotans Dined to Circus Frolics."
124. Weeks, 264-5.
125. Weeks, 276.
126. See "Ringling Hotel Opens Friday," *Sarasota News*, 5 January 1951, subject files, El Vernona Hotel/John Ringling Towers, Sarasota County Division of Historical Resources, Sarasota; and Ruttenger, "Memories Fill Vacant M'Toto Room."

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129. Rутtenber, "Memories Fill Vacant M'Toto Room."
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131. Rутtenber, "Memories Fill Vacant M'Toto Room."
132. Buck, "Sarasota, Growing Up."
133. Ibid.
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135. Ibid., 296.
136. See Rутtenber, "Memories Fill Vacant M'Toto Room"; and Stockbridge, "Ringling Hotel - In It's Heyday Sarasotans Dined to Circus Frolics."
137. See Buck, "Sarasota, Growing Up"; *Polk's* 1955 & 1957; and Rутtenber, "Memories Fill Vacant M'Toto Room."
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141. Dame, "Ringling Hotel on Sale Option."
142. "Ringling Hotel Sold for \$350,00 in Sarasota."
143. Rутtenber, "Memories Fill Vacant M'Toto Room."

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144. "Ringling Hotel to Undergo Refurbishing."
145. Moran, "towers' Rental Apartments Open."
146. See "Ringling Hotel to Undergo Refurbishing"; Moran, "Towers' Rental Apartments Open"; and Stockbridge, "Ringling Hotel - In It's Heyday Sarasotans Dined to Circus Frolics."
147. Moran, "Towers' Rental Apartments Open."
148. See Kearns, El Vernona NRHP form; Moran, "Towers' Rental Apartments Open"; and Stockbridge, "Ringling Hotel - In It's Heyday Sarasotans Dined to Circus Frolics."
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151. Gurney, "We're All to Blame for Towers' Plight?"
152. Feely, "Gardinier Firm Owns 5½ -Acre Tract Along Bayfront."
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162. "\$6 Mil. Needed for Renovating Ringling Hotel."
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168. Attrino, "Once-Spectacular Ringling Hotel Short \$300,000 for Restoration."
169. Rodriguez, "Battle Over Towers Heats Up."
170. Ardren, "Towers Keys Belong to Buford Now."
171. Tate, 17-19.
172. Rodriguez, "Towers to be Razed."

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The El Vernona Hotel was built by Sarasota developer Owen Burns, at a cost of \$800,000. The building was designed by architect Dwight James Baum. Baum was a nationally known and published architect whose study of Spanish Colonial Revival and Mission Style architecture in California influenced his Sarasota designs. Baum's design for the El Vernona Hotel was an interpretation of Spanish heritage invoking "Old World charm" applied to an up-to-date luxury hotel. Designed in the Mediterranean Revival Style, the El Vernona Hotel was a composite of Spanish Renaissance, Andalusian, Moorish, Tuscan, Venetian and Roman architectural elements.

2. Condition of fabric: This documentation was started three days before the demolition of the El Vernona Hotel. At this time, the El Vernona Hotel was in poor condition. The building was vacant for eighteen years prior to its demolition. Deterioration of the building was apparent on the exterior. The majority of the barrel tiles that comprised the roof were removed leaving the decking exposed. Most of the glass panes in the windows were broken. Some window and door openings were covered with plywood, but many remained open to vandals and vermin. Many details such as wood outlookers and decorative metal work were in an advanced state of deterioration.

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The integrity of the historic interiors was damaged when the building was converted from a hotel to apartment units. Prior to the extensive vandalism the interior fabric was largely destroyed above the first floor. The interior further deteriorated as a direct result of the failure to secure the exterior of the building. Standing water was present in numerous areas. Water had stained or decomposed decoratively treated wood beams, joists, and details. Elements such as mantels, door surrounds, wall surrounds, and wall sconces had been removed, leaving outlines of their shapes. Almost all of the significant details of the major interior spaces were in a state of deterioration or entirely missing. Animal waste, plant growth and graffiti were present on the inside.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: In massing and plan the hotel was centered around a two-story hyphen located at the center of the main (east) facade. A roof garden/patio and masonry superstructure of the clerestory of the dining hall occupied the core of the hotel. The building measured 125'-0" x 128'-0". It was approximately 65' in height. The total area was 71,241 square feet. The main facade was eight bays across the front elevation. It was divided into three sections: two pavillions located at the north and south ends of the entrance facade flanked a two story hyphen. The hotel was five stories, with a partial sixth story and a mezzanine level between the first and second floors. The hotel rooms were located on the second through fifth floors in the north, south and west sections of the building. The U-shaped plan of the upper stories provided increased light and ventilation for each room.

2. Foundations: Concrete.

3. Walls: The exterior walls were 18" thick finished in rough textured stucco applied over concrete and hollow clay tile block. The original color was described as a "rich brownish golden tone." Sections of the stucco walls were deliberately distressed to create an antique appearance by using brick inserts which were exposed through the "erosion" of the stucco surface. Projecting cast stone ornamental moldings and cartouches were also applied to the shaped parapet projections located at the main (east) facade and at the masonry superstructure located above the dining room at the second-story level. A spraycrete coating was applied to the exterior stucco in an effort to "waterproof" the building, but repairs to cracks and other damage to the stucco were not made prior to the application. There was evidence of spalling and cracking on all four exterior walls.

Wood decorative elements that were characteristic of the Mediterranean Revival style featured in the design of the El Vernona Hotel included decorative rafter tails, brackets, columns, lintels, grilles, glazing frames, fascia, outlookers, balcony rafters, and balustrades. Most of these features were severely deteriorated.

4. Structural systems, framing: Reinforced concrete and hollow clay tile block.

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5. Porches, stoops, balconies, bulkheads: An open loggia constructed of a nine-bay horseshoe-arched arcade on the second floor connected the north and south blocks of the hotel. The horseshoe arches were carried on red brick piers. The side-gable roof of the loggia was supported by a structural system of king posts and trusses. This arcade provided access to the roof garden on the second story which occupied the central core of the hotel.

Pergolaed terraces were located at the north and south corners of the fourth floor of the east facade. The south terrace was enclosed with awning windows ca. 1970. A three-bay shed roof portico was located at the west end of the north elevation. A pair of particularly ornate barrel tiled shed roof wood balconies were located on the fourth story of the north elevation.

Approximately two-thirds of the hotel guest rooms had either wrought iron or wood cantilevered balconies which opened to the interior court or to the four exterior walls. The balconies provided ventilation for the hotel rooms as well as adding visual interest to the exterior of the building.

6. Chimneys: Stuccoed exterior chimneys were located at the center of the ridge of the northeast corner, near the center of the west elevation, near the center of the south elevation, and in the west roof slope of the north penthouse apartment. The chimneys were topped with tile roof chimney caps. A partially demolished stuccoed chimney was located near the southwest corner of the building.

7. Openings: The fenestration on all elevations was asymmetrical. Cast stone ornamentation was applied to the wall surface at some of the window and door openings on the main (east) facade.

a. Doorways and doors: The main entrance was asymmetrically located in the second bay of the south pavilion of the east facade. The door was set within a Churrigueresque cast stone enframement constructed of quoins and voussoirs which dwarfed the round-arched opening. The entrance enframement was topped by a stepped frontispiece which was pierced by a balconied casement opening. The northern pavilion consisted of a pair of round-arched door enframements, with transoms which were covered by intersecting turned wood grilles. The round-arched door enframements flanked a projecting one-story porch which visually balanced the entrance enframement and fronticepiece located at the southern pavilion.

The building had lost doors, decorative materials of door surrounds, and associated hardware. The decorative architect's plaque at the main entry had been removed. The entrance doors to the shops on the ground floor and the main entrance doors to the hotel were removed and the openings were covered with plywood.

b. Windows and shutters: The ground floor originally had storefront window treatments of public areas of the original hotel spaces. Stylized oeil-de-boeuf windows set in cast stone enframements were centrally placed above each of the storefront windows on the main facade. Most of the historic

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materials were lost, removed, or damaged and the openings were covered with plywood. The plywood across the openings had deteriorated, allowing water intrusion and unauthorized access to the building. The majority of the original windows above the first floor were six- or eight-light metal casements. Many of these windows were replaced ca. 1965 with awning windows. The glass panes of most of the windows had been broken. Wood shutters originally flanked several of the window openings on the main (east) facade. The damage and loss of windows accelerated the deterioration of the interior of the building.

8. Roof:

a. Shape, covering: The roof was a combination of both hip and gable forms. Different sections of the building had separate roof forms of varying heights arranged in an irregular pattern to add visual interest to the building. Hip roofs covered the north and south sections of the building. The two penthouse apartments located at the west elevation each had hip roofs. A gable roof skylight occupied the central core of the building. The loggia located at the center of the east facade was set beneath a side-gable roof. All roof surfaces were covered with terra cotta barrel tiles. The majority of the roof tiles were removed in the early 1990s and stored inside the hotel. The building suffered severe exterior and interior damage as a result of the removal of the roof tiles and other roofing materials and the failure to provide temporary protection pending long term rehabilitation of the roof.

b. Cornice, eaves: Copper eaves, downspouts and gutters.

c. Dormers, cupolas, towers: A chamfered observation tower was located at the southeast corner of the building. It was finished in stucco with a barrel tile hip roof.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: The interior of the building originally contained 150 hotel rooms that were categorized as singles, doubles, and suites. In addition, there were two “bungalow” (penthouse) apartments located on the roof. In 1965, the building was converted to eighty-four apartments. The basic layout of the floor plan remained intact, but two guest rooms were combined to create one apartment unit. As part of this arrangement, bathroom fixtures of one guest room were removed and kitchen appliances and cabinets were installed in their place. Some of the larger hotel rooms were remodeled to function as efficiency units.

a. First floor: First floor rooms were the public spaces of the hotel and included the grand lobby, the reception lounge, the main stair hall, the writing room, the lounge, the dining room, shops, a mechanical room, and a kitchen area that originally included a “bakery, vegetable room, store rooms,

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meat house and fish box.” The entire kitchen area was extensively remodeled; subsequently, it was severely damaged by a recent fire.

b. Mezzanine level: The mezzanine level existed in the north and west sections of the building. It appeared from the existing floor plan that the rooms on this floor were used for housekeeping, storage, laundry and kitchen functions. There were no guest rooms located on the mezzanine level.

c. Second floor: The second floor primarily consisted of hotel rooms which were located on each side of a central hallway in the north, south and west sections of the building. Hotel rooms included bathrooms and small closets. The interior layout of guest rooms located on each side of a central hallway avoided inside rooms through arranging them around a central courtyard. This allowed for improved ventilation and illumination. The ladies lounge located in the southeast corner of the building was the only public space on the interior of the second story. A roof garden accessible through the second floor loggia occupied the central core of the building, creating an interior courtyard. In addition to the arcaded loggia, there was a fountain and a stone staircase. The fountain was sawn into pieces and stored on site. This roof garden originally served as an open air tea room.

d. Third, fourth and fifth floors: The arrangement of the third, fourth and fifth floors was identical. Hotel rooms were located on each side of a central hallway in the north, south and west sections of the building. Suites with private terraces overlooking N. Tamiami Trail were located at the northeast and southeast corners of the fourth floor.

e. Sixth floor (roof level): Two penthouse apartments were located at the west section of the roof level. Originally, an elaborate roof garden was situated between these two imposing elements.

2. Stairways: Stairways were originally located in the northeast, northwest, southeast and southwest corners of the building. The staircase in the southeast corner of the building was the grand staircase that led from the lobby to the upper floors. Spanish and Tunisian tile wainscoting was continued from the walls of the lobby to the wall stringer as far as the first landing. The same tile was also used to decorate the stair risers. The wrought iron balustrade was removed at an unknown date, resulting in damage to the decorative tiles. The other original staircases were replaced with utilitarian concrete and steel staircases presumably installed to meet fire codes when the building was converted to apartments. The northwest staircase was removed and replaced by an elevator shaft in 1965. An original staircase that connected the first floor to the mezzanine was located in the fifth bay of the east section of the building. The original decorative wrought iron balustrade remained in place.

3. Flooring: The floors in the public rooms on the first floor were finished with imported clay tiles in varying patterns. The hotel rooms originally had linoleum “checkerboard floors” which were later removed and replaced with carpeting. The corridor floors on the upper stories were originally covered with carpeted runners.

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4. Wall and ceiling finish: Extensive vandalism was evident throughout the interior of the building. The Spanish theme was carried through in the decoration of the interior which included the use of Spanish and Tunisian tile wainscoting and Spanish Revival wood paneled doors. There were wall expanses where the tile had been broken or removed entirely. The walls and ceilings of the hotel rooms and corridors were finished with smooth plaster. Bathroom walls were finished with black and white ceramic tile. Due to neglect and water damage, plaster had fallen from the ceilings and walls in many areas. Graffiti was present on most walls.

The elaborate interior wall and ceiling finishes for the unique public spaces are described below.

a. Lobby: The lobby was finished in Spanish and Tunisian tile wainscoting, which was also applied to the reception desk. The counter of the reception desk was black marble, which no longer remained in place. Photographs indicated that there was a great deal of ornamental wrought iron work in the lobby including railings and a chancel screen. All decorative iron work was removed by vandals. Above the wainscoting, the walls were finished with smooth plaster. The ceiling was finished with massive pecky cypress beams decoratively stenciled and gilded. Ornate miniature ship prows made of plaster jutted out from pillars where they intersected with the ceiling beams. Only one of these miniature ship prows remained in place. The others were destroyed by vandals; outlines of where they had been attached to the pecky cypress beams were still apparent.

b. Dining room: The monumental dining room was the most impressive space in the hotel, measuring 52'-0" x 52'-0" with a ceiling height of 26'-0". The dining room was also decorated with geometric tile wainscoting and smooth plaster. The ceiling was constructed of hand-hewn pecky cypress beams set beneath a gable roofed colored skylight. The beams were stenciled and rafter ends were decorated with heraldic shields. Only portions of two of the shields remained in place at the time of demolition. The ceiling expanse was supported by paired cast stone chamfered piers with cushion capitals. At the ceiling, three clerestory windows located at each exposure provided colored filtered light to the area below. Flanking each window opening were stenciled interior wood shutters held by elaborate shutter hinges in the shape of dogs. The upper story windows provided a view of the dining area from the roof garden above. Nearly all of the glass panes of the windows and skylight were broken and the skylight was covered with plywood. Some of the interior shutters were also missing. A polygonal fountain originally brought from Spain was located in the center of the room. It was removed in the late 1930s or early 1940s.

c. Lounge/lecture hall: The walls of the lounge/lecture hall were also finished in smooth plaster. The most notable feature of the room was the pecky cypress ceiling stenciled with a floral and geometric motif. A center medallion indicated where a chandelier once hung. Both the lounge and writing room were originally furnished with European antiques and oil paintings hung on the walls.

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d. Writing room: Like the lounge, the walls of the writing room were finished with smooth plaster. The ceiling was finished with hand hewn pecky cypress beams with carved wood brackets on either end. The beams were decoratively stenciled.

e. Ladies lounge: The ladies lounge was the only interior room in which the Spanish theme was not carried out. This room was designed in the Federal style. The walls were finished with elaborate base boards, chair rails, cornice, and paneling. The Federal door surrounds and mantel were removed at an unknown date.

f. M'Toto Room: The M'Toto Room, located in the northeast corner of the first floor, was established on December 23, 1944. The M'Toto Room was a circus-themed night club created by John Ringling North. Circus murals that appeared to date from the 1960s remained in place, although they were severely damaged by water and the collapse of the ceiling. Vestiges of earlier ocean-themed murals were evident.

5. Openings:

a. Doorway and doors: The interior doors were heavy, plain walnut, with a dull finish and "shutter ventilators of the most modern type forming the upper part for the warmer weather." Duretto doors, copies of old Spanish doors, divided the lobby and entrance hall. A pair of original twelve-panel doors remained in place in the ladies lounge. French doors provided access to private balconies in the hotel rooms. The original doors leading from the corridors to the hotel rooms were removed in 1965 and replaced with hollow core doors when the building was converted to apartments. Interior door openings were finished with simple wood moldings.

b. Windows: Window openings were finished on the interior with simple wood moldings.

6. Decorative features and trim: The interior of the hotel was also designed in the Mediterranean Revival Style. The hotel rooms were decorated in the Spanish style. Nearly all of the original decorative features, details, hardware elements and materials were removed, vandalized or lost. Photographs from the 1980s show the extent of the vandalism over recent years. Significant details and materials that were lost or severely damaged at the time of demolition included painted and shaped members, turned wood decorative elements, decorative hardware and lighting, all fireplace mantels, and decorative plaster features.

7. Hardware: Nearly all of the original hardware was removed by vandals. Wrought iron strap hinges remained in place on the doors that separated the lobby from the dining room.

8. Mechanical equipment: Elements of the mechanical systems such as wall sconces, chandeliers, switch plates, grilles, and radiators reflected the character of the Mediterranean Revival Style. Many

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of these elements which were still evident in photographs from the 1980s were missing at the time of demolition. Some original features such as the boiler, radiators and panel boxes remained in place. Historic passenger and service elevators, located in the south section of the building, were in disrepair and chutes had been filled with trash. An elevator shaft was added near the northwest corner of the building in 1965.

a. Heating, air conditioning, ventilation: The original heating system was steam heat and each room was equipped with a radiator. In 1965, openings were punched into the exterior walls to allow for the installation of wall air conditioning units. Many of the wall air conditioners were subsequently removed leaving openings that were patched with cinder block, wood and sheet metal.

b. Lighting: The original wrought iron lanterns in the lobby and entrance hall and all of the wrought iron wall sconces in the hotel rooms were removed by vandals. Outlines of the light fixtures could still be seen on some walls.

c. Plumbing: Original bathroom fixtures were white porcelain pedestal sinks, bathtubs and toilets. When the building was converted to apartments in 1965, many of these were removed as half of the bathrooms were converted to kitchens. The majority of the remaining original bathroom fixtures were smashed by vandals in an effort to gain access to the copper plumbing pipes.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The main (east) facade of the building was oriented to the east and faced N. Tamiami Trail (U.S. 41), formerly Broadway Avenue. The west (rear) elevation faced Sarasota Bay. This siting provided water views from the windows and balconies on the north, west and south sides of the building. Immediately south of the building--adjacent to the hotel--was the Burns Realty Company-Karl Bickel House (101 N. Tamiami Trail). This two-story Mediterranean Revival Style building was also designed by Dwight James Baum. Karl Bickel purchased the building in 1933 and converted it to his residence in 1935. A library wing was added to the northwest perimeter of the property at this time. The library wing was demolished in 1998, at the same time as the hotel. The Burns Realty Company-Karl Bickel House remains on site and is scheduled to be converted to a restaurant.

The original approach to the hotel was a broad, tiled terrace facing the intersection of First Street (formerly Seventh Street) and N. Tamiami Trail (formerly Broadway Avenue). There were mature Queen palms (*Cocos plumosa*) located in front of the hotel as well as an expanse of lawn. In 1986, the Tamiami Trail (U.S. 41) was widened between Palm Avenue and Second Street. This widening had a negative impact on the main facade of the hotel as well as the overall site. The front steps leading to the main entrance, the cast balusters, the tiled terrace, the queen palms and lawn were all

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removed. A concrete retaining wall and chain link fence were installed immediately adjacent to the building at N. Tamiami Trail. As a result, access to the hotel through the main entrance was impossible. In addition, road improvements negatively impacted site drainage and foundation conditions.

2. Historic landscape design: A palm-shaded garden was located behind the hotel, facing Sarasota Bay. Karl Bickel created extensive gardens to the rear of his house and introduced many exotic tropical plants. The gardens also featured masonry walls set with broken tiles and glass in tesserae patterns. He decorated his garden with statuary and plaques purchased in Spain. His house, library wing and garden were eventually combined with the hotel parcel of land.

Prior to demolition, little evidence of any historic landscape elements remained. The site was covered with heavily overgrown and unmaintained vegetation that extended up to six feet in some areas. Site drainage and plant growth accelerated water penetration in the building. The heavy plant growth also offered seclusion for vagrants which further encouraged vandalism to both the building and site.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Architectural Drawings: It appears that the original drawings for the El Vernona Hotel have not survived. As built drawings and plans were prepared by ADP Associates, Inc. of Sarasota, Florida in 1995. The drawings were completed as part of a proposed preservation and rehabilitation project and illustrated the existing condition of the building in 1995. The drawings are now in the possession of the current property owner, C. Robert Buford. Photographic copies of the drawings are included as part of the HABS documentation.

B. Early Views: The Department of Special Collections at the Syracuse University Library has fourteen photographs of the El Vernona Hotel dating primarily from the late 1920s. The majority of these photographs were taken by Samuel H. Gottscho. Photocopies of the thirteen photographs are included as part of the HABS documentation.

C. Interviews: No oral interviews were undertaken to prepare this form.

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E. Likely Sources Not Yet Investigated: N/A

F. Supplemental Material: N/A

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

The El Vernona Hotel had been vacant for eighteen years. During this time, numerous owners examined the feasibility of rehabilitating the building. Once the current owner, C. Robert Buford, received title to the property, he applied for and received a demolition permit. Recognizing the importance of this building to the local community, Buford offered to fund a systematic documentation of the El Vernona Hotel as this type of record did not already exist. Although not required by state or local regulation, Buford funded this HABS recordation, performed by Archaeological Consultants, Inc. of Sarasota, Florida, prior to the demolition of the building. Carrie Scupholm was the Project Architectural Historian and Kimberly D. Hinder was the Project Historian. The resulting HABS Level II documentation of the El Vernona Hotel will be a donation to the Library of Congress from C. Robert Buford.