Marlborough Hotel
Boardwalk at Park Place
Atlantic City
Atlantic County
New Jersey

HABS No. NJ-863

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

BACKGROUND

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the English taste for
ocean bathing and the enjoyment of the sea breezes was already well
established in the east coast of the United States. Along the New
Jersey shore, at the state's southern tip, Cape May was the resort
most accessible by water, then the most comfortable means of trans-
portation from Washington, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York.
Summer visitors flocked to its inns, rooming houses and hotels.
Cape May's half-century transportation monopoly was ended in 1853,
when agents of the Pennsylvania Railroad began negotiations with
the owners of Absecon Island to build a rail line connecting Phila-
delphia and Camden to the resort.

The rail connection to the population center had two significant
impacts. First and most important, it gave Atlantic City immediate
commercial success, with more than a dozen hotels and rooming houses
opening in the first two years of the City's existence. Second, the
location of the rail terminal at Atlantic and Tennessee Avenues had
significant impacts on the form of Atlantic City. The first public
buildings were constructed in the same block, and the most inten-
sive development took place at the eastern end of the island. In
1876 the immense success of the island (permanent population alone
had increased from 250 to nearly 5,000) brought a second railroad,
whose terminal to the southwest of the first, at Arkansas Avenue,
turned development to the southwest. On the strand between the
two stations were erected the hotels whose gaudy form and splendid
comforts gave Atlantic City its reputation as the playground of a
gilded age -- the Luray, the Windsor, the Traymore, the Brighton,
the Shelbourne, the Dennis, the Marlborough, the Blenheim and
finally the Claridge, crowning the ensemble with its slender spire.
These last hotels differed from those of the 1850's and 60's in that

with few exceptions, they made the transition from rooming house to
hotel. Some, notably the Dennis, Shelbourne, Claridge, Traymore
and Marlborough-Blenheim, went on to become grand hotels, designed
by nationally important architects and decorated by the leading
contemporary artists.

Because they predated the hostelry chains, the buildings themselves
were a principal agent of commercial success. In each instance the
new hotels were given strong architectural definition. The first
characteristic was shape, which was largely determined by the high
cost of beach front land. Most lots were long and narrow, best
filled by an "I" or "L" plan building. In the early years layers
of porches, ornamented with scroll-sawed decoration, gave the hotels
an informal, festive air. They were temples to sand, sun, sea and
above all, to the ocean breeze. They were homages to the strand, a
just tribute rendered to the misery of the Mid-Atlantic summers.
Their antecedents, beginning with the severe, barn-like structures
of the early resorts, such as those in Cape May, contained cavernous
dining rooms, billiard rooms and lobbies. Those public spaces were
surmounted by two or three levels of comparatively small guest cham-
bers averaging less than ninety square feet per room.

By mid-century, spurred by popular books on architecture and rising
expectations of comfort and luxury, the seashore hotels took on in-
creasingly elaborate forms, which as already noted, served to dis-
tinguish one building from another. At Illinois Avenue, Philadelphia
architect Frank Furness used Moorish minarets and clustered chimneys
to set the Windsor Hotel apart from its neighbors. Three years before,
architect Stephen D. Button, designer of many of Cape May's great
hotels, had given the Traymore Hotel its characteristic French man-
sards that ballooned up at the ends of each wing, and the articulat-
ing rhythm of segmented pediments that interrupted the roof line. On
the next property stood the fashionable Brighton Hotel, designed by
Lindley Johnson in 1888 and enlarged by him with a splendid casino,

all in the shingle style then popularized by McKim, Mead and White's
Newport Casino. And in 1892 the old Dennis Cottage was enlarged by
wings stretching toward the ocean, and its essential stylistic ref-
erence was to the Chateau style then becoming popular at Asheville,
North Carolina and later in Bruce Price's Chateau Frontenac in
Quebec. High roofs, clusters of chimneys, and gently projecting
bays gave dignity and, like the early Traymore, pointed toward the
direction of the architectural decisions of the twentieth century.

Location, and the increasingly luxurious and highly imaginative de-
signs of the larger, centralized hotel dramatized the success of the
new hotel district. Then in 1902, the regions to the east which in-
cluded Josiah White's recently enlarged Luray Hotel burned, thereby
opening new regions for development. But the surviving hotel dis-
trict between Ohio and Illinois Avenues maintained its dominance.
The region was at that time an interesting mix of uses, with institu-
tions and private houses interspersed among the hotels. In sequence
from east to west, the Windsor and Traymore Hotels confronted each
other across Illinois Avenue. Completing the Traymore block was the
Brighton Hotel, set well back from the ocean, with lawns leading to
a shingle style casino. The land now known as Park Place was given
by the owners of the Brighton as a park, thereby securing the beach
view for the hotel guests as well as for Frederick Hemsley's (the
hotel owner) house that once stood on the site of the Claridge. Be-
hind his house, fronting on Pacific Avenue, were the stately summer
houses of Philadelphians, Frederick A. Poth, brewer and land specula-
tor, and Kate Disston, whose family was known for the tool manufactory
in the Tacony secton of the Quaker City. To the west, fronting onto
the "Brighton Park", was the convent and Academy of the Sacred Heart,
a Roman Catholic "academy of high class training" with a "villa" hous-
ing convent near the ocean, and the school building (erected in 1889)
toward the rear. It remained on the site from November 7, 1885 until
it closed and the property was sold in 1900 to Josiah White, owner of
the Luray, who proposed to erect a new hotel, the Marlborough. The

next property, across Ohio Avenue, was occupied by another institu-
tion, the Children's Seashore Home for Invalid Children, whose resi-
dential cottages stretched from the beach towards a central admin-
istration building. When that property became too valuable, it too
was sold for hotel purposes and became the site of the Blenheim ad-
dition to the Marlborough. Beyond stood the Dennis Cottage and the
Shelbourne, which joined the Traymore and the Marlborough-Blenheim
in making this the luxurious hotel district for which Atlantic City
was famous.

If the location of the great hotels was determined by the rail ter-
minals, then the urban form of Atlantic City was a consequence of the
economics of land cost. As could be anticipated, ocean and beach
front properties were at a premium causing the hotel industry to ac-
quire long, narrow beach front properties. A block back from the
beach, along Pacific Avenue, were commercial and community buildings,
particularly churches, while rail terminals and public buildings
stood along the central spine of the island on Atlantic Avenue.

Finally, a word or two about the clientele of the new resort is in
order. In Philadelphia, certain architects, notably Frank Furness
(Windsor Hotel) and Addison Hutton (Chalfonte and Haddon Hall Hotels)
have been linked to establishment clients, but their presence in At-
lantic City should not disguise the essential nature of the clientele.
Significant houses were owned by two North Philadelphia residents,
Charles B. Ellis the traction magnate, and the Disston family, as well
as Frederick L. Poth of Powelton. They were nouveau riche who owned
houses in the fashionable sections of Philadelphia and were no doubt
attracted to the social fluidity of Atlantic City. These men brought
architects from Philadelphia who were accustomed to designing great
houses for the City's industrial and commercial elite. This accounted
for the presence in Atlantic City of Stephen D. Button (Traymore),
William Decker (Windsor) and Frank Watson (Brighton). But Atlantic

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City's developers also included members of the old families of Phila-
delphia whose genteel reserve in no way limited their interest in
real estate speculation, particularly when allied with the railroads.
Their involvement assured the activity of an alternative circle of
architects such as Quakers Addison Hutton, William L. Price, Walter
Cope and John Stewardson; Episcopalian George W. Hewitt; and Unitar-
ian Frank Furness. That mixture was largely unmatched in the other
resorts of the New Jersey shore, and was rivaled only by the archi-
tectural variety of Newport, Rhode Island. Thus, with a few notable
exceptions, such as the Shelbourne Hotel designed by the New Yorkers
Warren and Wetmore, the bulk of Atlantic City's important buildings
are the work of Philadelphians.

THE MARLBOROUGH

In 1900, nearly a half century after the Dennis was established, Josiah
White, owner of the Luray Hotel and a Quaker, acquired the property of
the school and the Convent of the Sacred Heart for a new hotel. That
year, he retained Philadelphia Quaker William L. Price (1861 - 1916),
previously designer of additions to the Luray as well as architect of
the new dining room for White's cousin Daniel White's neighboring Traymore
Hotel. Price had already established a reputation as a hotel architect
with the chateau style Kennilworth Inn of 1890 at Asheville, North
Carolina, which received much attention in the architectural press. Dur-
ing the last decade of the nineteenth century, Price's various firms pro-
vided plans for the additions to several Atlantic City hotels as well as
another in Asbury Park, New Jersey in 1897.

Price's decision to design a shingled chateau style hotel on the beach
may seem something of an anomaly, particularly in light of his theories
about the Kennilworth Inn, whose similar style was influenced by the

mountainous site. The obvious conclusion is that the hotel's style
was determined more by the now conventionalized use of the chateau
style, which had spread from the Kennilworth to the 1892 wing of the
Dennis, and beyond to Bruce Price's great Chateau Frontenac in Quebec.
Moreover, the style had a significant advantage for the hotel's opera-
tion, for the variety of spaces and porches, and the hierarchy of spaces
rising up into the great roof all made for a visual representation of
status, emphasizing the social eminence of the guest as clearly as the
various classes of accommodation on an ocean liner.

The design of the Marlborough was largely conditioned by the nature of
the site. The street front was placed along the Park Place edge, tak-
ing advantage of the open space permanently assured by the Park, while
the Ohio Avenue side was given over to lawns framed by the long wing
of the hotel and the ell.

The new hotel was more innovative in its overall mass and style than as
a structure or in detail. Quarry faced ashlar masonry bearing walls
sheathed the lower stories, and similarly rustic stone formed the col-
umns and arcades that supported the porch The motif of the arcade of
porches supporting the upper stories of the hotel can be traced directly
to Price's own house in Overbrook, Pennsylvania of 1898-99. Above, the
frame walls were covered with red slate shingles, worked out in various
decorative patterns in the manner of the "shingle style". Deep eaves
and a three story high pyramidal roof, rhythmically articulated by great
dormers, provided the crowning elements for the ballooning volume of the
building. Exterior decoration of the building was limited to the quality
of the materials and little more. John Ruskin argued for the use of real
carving, or none; Price here followed his argument.

Within, however, the building was richer, showing hints of the originality
that would characterize Price's later hotels. The first hint to the guest
was received at the entrance level, where a great fireplace confronted the

door. Above its severe stone planes, a painting in the mode of the
Brandywine School, by George Harding, made an ironic comment on the
role of the Atlantic City innkeeper. It portrayed three city slickers
fleecing a country bumpkin, while above was written the laconic com-
ment, "I was a stranger and they took me in." Unfortunately, the
smooth fresco-like surface of the painting was achieved by a heavy
gesso coating on a burlap type of material, and when attempts were
made to remove the painting, it was destroyed.

The remainder of the lower levels of the hotel served less grand pur-
poses, with beach entrance, children's playroom and laundry taking
most of the area. A grand stair, once lighted by leaded glass windows,
ascended on the left to the hotel lobby, where more of the architect's
originality was displayed. Dominating the hall was a splendid polygonal
core of fireplaces, surrounded by a cylindrical colonnade, as if this
were a tholos in the heart of the building. From that center radiated
the beams, disguised by cornices, of the spine of iron columns and gir-
ders lower stories of the hotel. This traditional use of modern ma-
terials characterized Price's work at the end of the nineteenth cen-
tury. Four years later, at the Blenheim, Price's techniques had changed.

Other rooms in the front of the hotel were without the focus of the
fireplace, but had elements of interest. Of note in the rooms near the
ocean was Price's direct handling of the cast iron columns, which were
left unclad, adorned only by flat disc capitals that recall the first
attempts of John Nash to use iron at the Brighton Pavilion in England.
An echo of Price's interest in Art Nouveau is evident in the flaring
plaster cones that form a transition from those capitals to the plane
of the ceiling. Those rooms opened onto large porches which looked out
to the ocean across the hotel lawns. Unlike the later hotels of the
beachfront, this one never had a solarium attached to the front; thus
part of the site remained open for a 1950's motel wing.

The other great public room of the hotel was placed on the southwest,
where a one story dining room wing formed an ell that provided large

windows on to the side lawn. The dining room was framed by the same
structural system as the remainder of the building, masonry bearing
walls along the perimeter, and a grid of cast iron columns within.
In the center of the dining room, the grid was disguised by a curving
entablature forming a large circular space, recalling the tholos fire-
place of the lobby, the whole being roofed over by a glass dome mounted
within an exterior conical glazed roof. The result was a splendidly
lighted dining room whose general motif was a delicate "colonial,"
appropriate to the shingle style of the hotel. Furniture, particularly
the handsome fluted leg dining tables and Chippendale Revival chairs,
completed the effect.

In later years, the dining room was altered, first by the insertion
of the bridge that connected the Marlborough to the Blenheim, which
blocked the view of the ocean. More recently, the room was repainted
in a wedgewood color scheme, which was appropriate enough for the
finish of the room. Unfortunately, the great dome was painted over,
destroying the quality of light for which the room was once justly
famed.

The game room, also originally skylighted, served as an annex to the
dining room and continued the column grid and the detail of the dining
room. To the east, another smaller public space, the Chevy Chase rooms,
opened through a triple arcade into a large pleasant bay. All were
served directly by the enormous kitchen to the rear.

Above the Exchange floor, the hotel reverted to the simple details
and small rooms that characterized the seashore hotel. Corridors were
lacking in almost all relief, save for a flood of light in the center,
at the stair, and at the inland end, where it flared into an octagonal
space. The sparest of wood surrounds, devoid of all molding, framed
the doors to the guest chambers; and the remainder of the trim was no
more elegant. Of interest is the use of a pressed metal cornice,

supported on wood blocking, that served as a pipe chase for the plumb-
ing.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MARLBOROUGH

The transitional role that the Marlborough played in the development
of the Atlantic City Hotel is evident in form, in technics, and in the
accommodations provided. The previous discussion of the Dennis indi-
cates that the Atlantic City hostelry was typically an agglomerative
affair, built in bits and pieces, and generally unified by secondary
screening elements, such as porches. The Windsor, Traymore, Luray,
Shelbourne and others followed that pattern. In the case of Josiah
White's Marlborough, however, the building was constructed in one
phase, producing a unified and monumental exterior of some force.
That unitary development, also made it possible for architect and
owner to produce a building whose form was in some measure related
to the task and to the accepted values of hotel management of the era,
by making available a broad spectrum of room choices.

The consequence was a relatively articulated building form, not merely
a slab, in the manner of contemporary hotels that depend on convention
business and which, to avoid offending some guests, prefer to make
all rooms essentially similar. Instead, Price developed a design that
anticipated the form of the later great boardwalk hotels, the Blenheim
and the Traymore. The rooms nearest the ocean were clearly most val-
uable, so the end block was widened slightly, doubling the number of
rooms across the end. That block was not, however, so enlarged as to
obstruct the views to the ocean of the rooms along the long bar of the
hotel, nor of those along the ell. Great bays that give the long side
form, smaller bays and, in some levels, porches, articulate the facades
and add to the interest of these rooms. Finally, at the rear, farthest
from the ocean, are the smallest, least expensive rooms.

The articulation and organization of the exterior aiming at the maximum

use of the site for the pleasure of the guests was reinforced by the
design of the various public spaces. The fact that the building was
a single phase plan also added to the effectiveness of those spaces.
Directional axes of communication were interrupted by focal elements,
such as the great fireplace, and terminated in architectural set pieces,
or by equally grand public spaces, resulting in a coherence heretofore
absent. The splendor of the lobby and the elegance of the dining room
stand at the beginning of a line of great public spaces that character-
ized the architecture of the Atlantic City of the early twentieth cen-
tury.

Finally, the Marlborough House Hotel was of significance for the nature
of the accommodations provided. The transitional nature of the building
is apparent, but its direction was equally obvious. For the first time,
the guest rooms at the ocean end and in the long bar of the hotel were
enlarged with baths provided for each pair of rooms, contrasting with the
usual pattern of shared bath and toilet facilities on the corridors.
Only the least expensive rooms on the rear wing were not provided with
this new luxury.

Prepared by:

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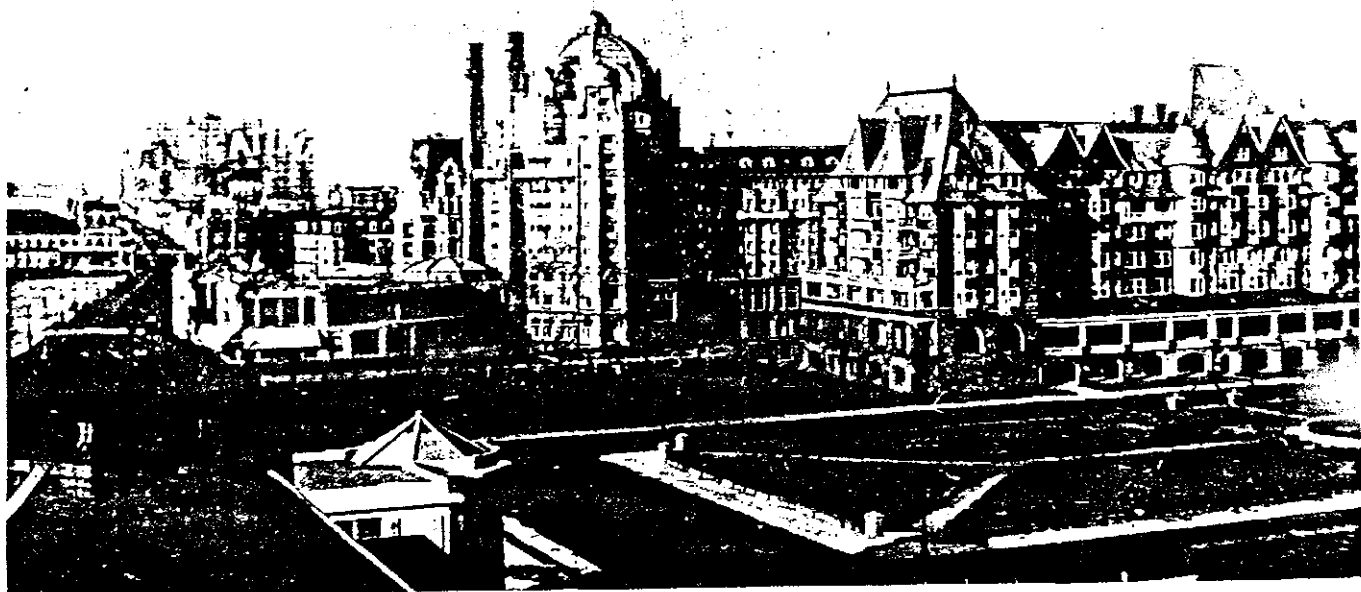
Hotels Marlborough and Blenheim with Dennis in background
(Price archives, collection George E. Thomas, c. 1919).

Addendum To: HABS NO. NJ-863
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                          PHOTOGRAPHS

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