

Atlantic City Convention Hall
New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail
On Boardwalk, West of Mississippi Avenue
Atlantic City
Atlantic County
New Jersey

HABS No. NJ-1130

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

ATLANTIC CITY CONVENTION HALL

HABS NO. NJ-1130

Location: On Boardwalk, West of Mississippi Avenue, Atlantic City, Atlantic County, New Jersey

Present Owner: Atlantic City Convention Center Authority, 2301 Boardwalk, Atlantic City

Present Use: Convention Hall

Significance: The Convention Hall--an American Society of Civil Engineers, Civil Engineering Landmark--is a monumental architectural and engineering accomplishment, built in 1926-29 in Beaux Arts style. The hall underscores the city's history as an amusement and recreation resort. Atlantic City had been a convention destination since the late nineteenth century; in 1912, 175 state and national conventions returned annually to the resort. In addition, the Auditorium is still one of the largest interior spaces in the world; it was at the time of its construction the largest building in the world without roof posts or pillars.

Description: The only remaining structure reminiscent of Atlantic City's peak years of attraction and prosperity during the early 20th century is the Convention Hall. The Convention Hall has a Beaux Arts Classical facade, overlaid with Lombardic Romanesque and Assyrian Revival--both styles of which were being rediscovered by architectural historians in the 1920s. The Lombard Romanesque was the subject of volumes by Arthur Kingsley Porter and others, and the Assyrian Revival a result of Assyrian archeological finds made by the British Museum during that time.¹

The Convention Hall consists of a front section, made of cut limestone, with an impressive multi-story arcade above the recessed entrance, flanked by tall pylons. This is flanked by three-story wings. The architectural detailing inlaid in the stonework of the facade is somewhat Mediterranean with shallow corbels and stylized Ravennate basket capitals, sheltered by a tile roof. The facade also incorporates ocean flora and fauna--as typical of the boardwalk hotels--with stone seahorses, porpoises, shells and crustaceans in the upper surfaces. Behind the front section is the round-arched auditorium, sheathed in variegated yellow brick laid in decorative patterns. To the front of the Convention Hall is a curved colonnade composed of limestone with small, trabeated belvederes at each end.²

¹ James H. Charleton, National Register of Historic Places Inventory--Nomination Form--Atlantic City Convention Hall, pg. 3 of item 8.

² Charleton, pgs. 1 & 2 of item 7. This abbreviated information is taken from Charleton's more lengthy description; for more detail, see his nomination form.

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History: Atlantic City's Convention Hall, constructed 1926-9, appeared during the era of the substantial Boardwalk hotels, simultaneously with the resort's pre-Depression peak. Commenting on the Boardwalk in 1929, the New York Times enthused "[It] is magnificent proof of America's newly found wealth and leisure. It is an iridescent bubble on the surface of our fabulous prosperity." Atlantic City "is the America of the national advertising page, of the automobile, of the radio, of the motion pictures."³ Convention Hall's facade inscription explicitly acknowledged the building's symbolic and monumental aspects: "A PERMANENT MONUMENT--CONCEIVED AS A TRIBUTE TO THE IDEALS OF ATLANTIC CITY--BUILT BY ITS CITIZENS AND DEDICATED TO RECREATION, SOCIAL PROGRESS, AND INDUSTRIAL ACHIEVEMENTS."

The Hall's architects, Lockwood & Greene of Boston, undertook the city's mandate in true Atlantic City style to outdo all competitors with the biggest and the best. The Auditorium is still one of the largest interior spaces in the world; it was at the time of its construction the largest building in the world without roof posts or pillars.⁴ It covers seven acres, had the world's biggest stage, and largest pipe organ.⁵ 40,000 people could attend an event in the Great Hall--30,000 seated on the Hall's floor, and 10,000 in the mezzanine. As a result of its engineering achievements, the Convention Hall was designated a Civil Engineering Landmark by the American Society of Civil Engineers.

The Convention Hall has traditionally hosted the "Miss America" pageant, and was the site of the 1964 Democratic National Convention. Atlantic City had been a convention destination since the late nineteenth century; in 1912, 175 state and national conventions returned annually to the resort.⁶ The Hall was designed for multi-purpose use, however. It has been transformed into a ice-skating rink, football field, horse-show field, steeplechase course and polo field. The Hall continued this trajectory, underscoring the city's history as an amusement and recreation resort.

Historian: Alison Isenberg, New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trails project, Summer 1992

Sources: Burk and McFetridge. A Complete Guide to Atlantic City, 1885.

Butler, Frank. Frank Butler's Book of the Boardwalk. Atlantic City: Haines and Co., 1952.

³ As quoted in Atlantic City: 125 Years of Ocean Madness, p.186.

⁴ James H. Charleton, National Register of Historic Places Inventory--Nomination Form--Atlantic City Convention Hall, p.3.

⁵ Butler, Book of the Boardwalk, p.37.

⁶ Herbert Foster, The Urban Experience of Blacks in Atlantic City, New Jersey: 1850-1915, p.16.

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- Charleton, James H. National Register of Historic Places Inventory-
-Nomination Form--Atlantic City Convention Hall, 17 June 1985.
- Eisenberg, Lee and Vicki Gold Levi. Atlantic City: 125 Years of Ocean Madness. New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc. Publishers, ?.
- Fleming, Thomas. New Jersey, A Bicentennial History. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. 1977.
- Foster, Herbert James. The Urban Experience of Blacks in Atlantic City, New Jersey: 1850-1915. Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, New Brunswick, Dissertation, 1981.
- Funnell, Charles. By the Beautiful Sea: The Rise and High Times of That Great American Resort, Atlantic City. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1983.
- New Jersey--Life, Industries and Resources of a Great State. Newark, New Jersey: New Jersey Chamber of Commerce, 1928.
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- Thomas, George and Carl Doebley. Cape May, Queen of the Seaside Resorts: Its History and Architecture. Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1976.
- The WPA Guide to 1930s New Jersey., Compiled and Written by the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration for the State of New Jersey. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1939.

Project Information:

This project was sponsored by the New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail (NJCHT) of the National Park Service, Janet Wolf, director. The documentation was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), Robert Kapsch, chief, under the direction of HABS historian Sara Amy Leach, project supervisor. Three historians completed the research during summer 1991: Field supervisor Sarah Allaback (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), Alfred Holden (University of Vermont), and Camille Gatza (North Carolina). David Ames (University of Delaware) made the large-format photographs.