

FINAL HISTORIC DESIGNATION STUDY REPORT

SECTION I. NAME

Historic: Biltmore Grand Apartment Hotel

Common Name: Biltmore Apartment Hotel

SECTION II. LOCATION

1341-1345 W. Wisconsin Avenue

4th Aldermanic District
Alderman Paul Henningsen

Legal description: Tax Key No.: 398-0548-113

ROGERS SUBD IN SW 1/4 SEC 29 & SE 1/4 SEC 30-7-22
BLOCK 253 PART LOTS 25-26-27-28 COM 4' W OF NE COR LOT 28
-TH S 180'-TH E 4'-TH S 15'-TH W 220.63'-TH N 45'-TH E 31'-TH N
150'-TH E 185.63' TO BEG

SECTION III. CLASSIFICATION

Structure

SECTION IV. OWNER

Marquette University
615 N. 11th St.
Milwaukee
WI 53233

SECTION V. YEAR BUILT: 1921/1925

ARCHITECT Rosman and Wierdsma

SECTION VI. PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

The Biltmore Apartment Hotel is located in the 1300 block of W. Wisconsin Avenue on the south side of the street. At one time N. 13th and N. 14th streets both intersected W. Wisconsin Avenue, but since the expansion of the Marquette campus this is no longer the case. The building faces north and was built across parts of four different lots. The institutional buildings of the Marquette campus currently occupy the surrounding area. Immediately to the south of the Biltmore is the former student union, Brooks Hall. The Biltmore is the only residential structure in the immediate area and is surrounded by newer structures.

This section of W. Wisconsin Avenue was once home to many large mansions, which belonged to the city's elite. In the early twentieth-century the mansions gradually gave way to apartment buildings, the demand for which increased as the city grew. Another factor in the changing character of this neighborhood over time has been the extension of the Marquette University campus. Presently, Marquette owns all of the area surrounding the Biltmore and there are a number of large structures, interspersed with areas of open land and walkways.

The Biltmore Apartment Hotel is a four story, U-shaped, multi-unit residential facility. The primary facades of both wings are clad in yellow pressed brick, as is the entire recessed area between the wings. Common brick was used to clad the rest of the building, and it has been painted. There is extensive use of white and buff terra cotta trim on the primary facade of the two wings and on the grand arcade, located between the wings. The vast majority of the architectural detail is also located on the primary facade of each wing and in the arcade.

The two wings face onto W. Wisconsin Avenue and there are no entryways located on either wing. The Wisconsin Avenue facade of each wing is identical in form, size and detail. There are four window bays across each wing, the two bays on the outside comprise three six-over-one double hung windows, and the two bays in the center of the facade comprise two six-over-one double-hung windows. The original windows are visible through more modern one-over-one double-hung storm windows. The raised basement and first story are clad in terra cotta and they are separated from the upper stories by a terra cotta belt course. Two vertical bands of intricate two-tone terra cotta work flank the two central bays of windows on the upper stories. These bands extend to the roofline, where they are topped with terra cotta finials. Another terra cotta belt course is located at the sill level of the fourth story. Above the fourth story, extending horizontally across the Wisconsin Avenue facade is a pierced balustrade.

The recessed area between the wings is the location for the main entrance to the building and is where much of the terra cotta ornament is concentrated. A one-story pavilion extends from the point where the wings meet the connecting portion of the building. The pavilion is covered entirely in terra cotta and has five, Tudor-style pointed arch openings across the facade. Between each arched opening is an ornamental terra cotta column. The piers separating each arch are carried above the balustrade to terminate in delicate finials. Through the openings of the pavilion one enters a shallow arcaded area. There are three Tudor-style arched doorways, each of which corresponds to one of the three central openings in the facade of the pavilion. The doorways are surrounded by terra cotta, with a Gothic-style drip molding framing the three doors. In the spaces between the arched entrances and the drip molding there is a recurring, terra cotta, grapevine motif. The doors are wooden with glass panels and they look original to the building. What looks like a service door to one of the original stores is located to the right of the main entrance. This is a rectangular doorway, topped with a Gothic-style drip molding. As is typical with the apartment

hotel, a grand lobby lies just beyond the entry doors, fitted out with a backlit art glass skylight, decorative moldings, a service desk and elevators.

The remainder of the building is functional in appearance. Windows on the remaining facades are grouped in bays of one and two six-over-one double-hung windows. These groupings corresponding to whether a studio apartment, one bedroom or two bedroom unit is located there. There is a parapet above the fourth story, although it is not pierced with an ornamental balustrade as on the Wisconsin Avenue facade. A wing extending from the south-west corner of the main structure interrupts the symmetry of the Biltmore's U-shaped plan. It is believed that this housed a couple of stores in the early days, although it is now used for residential purposes and is connected to the main structure. The roof can be accessed from a tower that protrudes above the fourth story on the south side of the building. A chimney also protrudes from the south-east corner.

Very few changes have been made to the exterior of the building, although it is known that large portions of the interior have been remodeled. It is not known at what stage the brick on the secondary facades was painted. A fire escape stair on the east side of the building was extensively repaired and rebuilt earlier this year. The Biltmore appears to be in excellent condition and the important architectural details of the facades, which face W. Wisconsin Avenue, are all intact.

SECTION VII. SIGNIFICANCE

The Biltmore Grand apartment hotel is significant as one of the last grand apartment buildings located on W. Wisconsin Avenue. Since the avenue was lined with mansions and had a certain cache, the early apartment buildings constructed along the thoroughfare tended to emulate Gothic and Tudor palaces in their design. At one time there were a number of such buildings in this area, but over time they have been removed to make way for urban renewal projects and to accommodate the needs of Marquette University. This building is a fine example of the apartment hotel building type. The apartment hotel allowed residents to live in a large apartment facility but provided them with some of the comforts that would ordinarily be provided in a hotel. These comforts might include a laundry service, message service, stores and a reception area. The original floor plan and lobby of the Biltmore are largely intact, with many of the original features remaining - reception desk, lobby skylight, moldings, terrazzo floor, doorways, grand entrance arcade. The Shorecrest and the Astor are two examples of other apartment hotels in the city. The U-shaped plan of the Biltmore reflects the Garden Apartment Movement of the early twentieth-century. The U-shape allowed for landscaping and green space between the wings of the building. In some cases, such as the Biltmore, there would be a grand entrance arcade.

The Biltmore Grand apartment hotel is also significant for its exemplification of the Neo-Gothic Revival style. This is one of the few remaining large-scale buildings, in the city of Milwaukee, which were built in this style. Neo-Gothic Revival is a twentieth-century expression of traditional Gothic forms. It was typically used for public buildings rather than residential structures, with the architectural details (finials, arches etc.) being made in terra cotta. The Neo-Gothic Revival style was not as common here as in other urban areas and examples include the Plankinton Arcade Building at 161 W. Wisconsin Avenue (1915/1925-1926), and the Franklin State Bank Building (today's Old Line Life Insurance Company Building) at 707 N. 11th Street (1929). The elements of this structure which are representative of Neo-Gothic Revival are the pointed arches on the cloister-like arcade, the elaborate finials on the arcade and primary facade, and the intricate balustrade.

The masterful use of terra cotta also lends significance to the Biltmore. Terra cotta itself flourished as an important building material for a relatively short time period, from the late 19th century to the Great Depression. In Milwaukee, early examples appeared on the Romanesque Revival residences and Commercial Style buildings and took the place of more expensive and heavier stone trim. After the turn of the twentieth century the dark rich hues previously used were being replaced with gleaming bright colored terra cotta. Technological innovations enabled the production of the new glazed terra cotta which allowed for the introduction of white and other colors, a startling departure from the previous “brown decades”. Not only was trim produced but also glazed brick and tile so entire buildings could be clad with the new gleaming surfaces. Terra cotta, for all of its popularity, was a relatively rare and still expensive building material and only in larger cities like Milwaukee could concentrations of these clad buildings be found. Terra cotta was produced at only a handful of companies in the United States and the industry languished by the end of the Great Depression. Only recently, with the interest in restoration of terra cotta structures, has some production started up once again.

On the Biltmore Apartment Hotel all of the decorative features are covered in white and buff mottled terra cotta trim, which makes this building distinctive and suggests the highest level of craftsmanship. There is also a wide vertical band of intricately patterned terra cotta covering a portion of the primary facade of each wing of the building. It is believed, from a citation in the Daily Reporter, that the terra cotta was furnished by the Northwestern Terra Cotta Co. of Chicago, an important producer of this material in the Midwest.

SECTION VIII. HISTORY

West Wisconsin Avenue was previously known as Grand Avenue and, before that, as Spring Street. There were a few houses located on Spring Street in the mid-1840's, although the road as it appears today was by no means recognizable. Spring Street comprised a mixture of many of the finest mansions in the city and some far more modest, simple frame dwellings. By 1883, the street had become a boulevard and in 1885 Elizabeth Plankinton donated the Washington Monument at its east end. Many of the finest mansions were still intact in the early 1920's, when the Biltmore apartment hotel was constructed, although this area was being transformed with the introduction of massive apartment complexes and the expanding land base of Marquette University. In this context, the Biltmore was a product of its time, when affordable housing close to the center of the city was a highly sought after commodity. The Biltmore is a fine example of the early twentieth-century apartment hotel and it is the only one left on W. Wisconsin Avenue where previously there were many. In addition to this the Biltmore exemplifies the exquisite craftsmanship and imagination associated with large Neo-Gothic Revival structures.

The story of the Biltmore Grand apartment hotel is made complicated by the fact that the original plan for an apartment building on this site was not realized, due to a series of lawsuits brought against the investment company financing the work. It was not until four years later, when a different financier and revised plans were in place, that the extant structure was erected. The architects were the same for both sets of plans, Rosman and Wierdsma, and it is believed that the original contractors were retained to build the revised structure.

On May 3rd, 1921, the Harley Investment Company was incorporated to construct, own, maintain, and lease apartment houses and hotels. The partners in this company were Harley and Hubert Riesen, local masonry contractors, and Bernard A. Klatt, a local lawyer. The company was capitalized

at \$500,000 and five hundred shares were issued. Two days later a building permit was issued for the construction of a seven story, reinforced concrete and brick structure at a cost of \$600,000. Prior to the construction of the Biltmore a number of frame houses had been wrecked to make way for the apartment hotel. In October of that year the incorporation records were altered so that Alex Tiefenthaler, a local real estate agent, became the president of the company. Between December 16th, 1921 and August 14th, 1922 construction was underway on the foundations and the pouring of concrete for the first story and west wing. In August 1922, Harley Riesen was warned to cease construction temporarily, as the sidewalk on Grand Avenue was caving in.

The Harley Investment Co. encountered serious financial difficulties and was sued successfully a number of times (4/22-12/22) for defaulting on mortgages and promissory notes. The plaintiffs were either investors or contractors and it is believed that these legal actions caused the demise of the Harley Investment Company and its involvement with the Biltmore Apartment Hotel.

Revised plans and new financing for the building had been secured by January, 1925. Construction began in the same month and was completed by March, 1926. This structure was four stories tall, was built from steel frame enclosed with brick, and it cost \$250,000. There were 118 units, comprised mostly of studios and one-bedroom apartments, with a few two-bedroom apartments. It is interesting to note that the financier of the new project was Benjamin Weil, the real estate agent who had provided the mortgage for the original planned structure.

A study of some of the early occupants of the Biltmore reveals that mostly single women as well as a few married couples occupied this building. The most likely explanation for this is because the units were studios and one-bedroom apartments. The most common occupations among residents of the Biltmore were teacher, salesperson, nurse and office assistant. Many tenants appear to have been employed by one or another of the hospitals which were once located in the vicinity. The apartment hotel catered to the needs of its tenants by providing some essential services. In its earliest days the Biltmore provided services such as a restaurant, delicatessen, beauty salon, corset shop and tailor. These businesses were operated privately by individuals who may, or may not have lived at the Biltmore, although they leased the store premises.

Benjamin Weil owned the Biltmore until the late 1940's, when Jacob Meister bought it. Mr. Meister tried to obtain a permit, in 1953, to build an additional four stories on top of the extant structure, although his application was denied.

In 1963, there was some discussion of whether the Biltmore would be one of the 82 properties to be demolished for the Marquette Urban Renewal Program. In the 1970's various investment and property management companies owned the Biltmore. The Biltmore's association with Marquette University is believed to have begun in the early 1980's when the Law School Library was housed there. Marquette University acquired the building in April, 1986. By the late 1980's the entire apartment complex was being used by the university exclusively as a residence hall. Currently, the building is used as a residence hall. It houses 175 students and 3 long-term residents.

The Architects

Architects Miner R. Rosman and Oliver W. Wierdsma were in partnership from 1919 through 1930. Rosman was a native of Whitewater, Wisconsin and graduated from Beloit College before coming to Milwaukee around 1904. City directories indicate that he worked as a designer/draftsman for the local firm of Leenhouts and Guthrie in his early years. Oliver Wierdsma was a Milwaukee native, the son of carpenter-contractor Ebbel Wierdsma. He too worked as a draftsman for Leenhouts and Guthrie

beginning in 1911 and eventually became the office superintendent. He was first registered through the state as an architect in 1918. The two left their employer to establish their own partnership in 1919. The firm appears to have specialized in the design of apartment buildings and office towers although we do know of a Craftsman style residence they built at 2524 N. Grant Blvd. in 1920 and the Raymond J. Cannon Residence at 4751 W. Woodlawn Court in 1919. Among their work are the small Mediterranean Style Lakeside Apartments at 829 N. Cass St. (1922) and the East Town Apartments at 719 E. Knapp St. (1920). Their larger projects consist of the Prairie Style apartment building at 2933-37 W. Wells St. (1922); the Tudor Style Chain Investment-built apartment at 3421 W. Wells St. (1923); Franklin Arms Apartments at 3120-28 W. Wisconsin Ave. (1923); the Neo-Gothic Revival style Association of Commerce Building at 828 N. Broadway (1923); the Tudor Revival style Roosevelt Arms Apartments at 2324 W. Wisconsin Ave. (1924); the Colonial Revival style apartments at 3131 W. Wells St. (1924); the large Marquette Apartments at 1628 W. Wisconsin Ave. (1926); the LaSalle Apartment Hotel/Cobeen Hall Marquette University at 721-29 N. 11th St. (1927); the Knickerbocker Hotel at 1028 E. Juneau Ave. (1929) and the Neo-Gothic Revival style Biltmore Apartment Hotel (1921/1925).

With the decline in commissions during the Great Depression, the partnership broke up and Oliver Wierdsma left Milwaukee. He later founded the Oliver Construction Co. in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin in 1945. Wierdsma's company built the Waukesha County Courthouse, the Waukesha County Technical Institute, and St. Joseph's Hospital in West Bend. Wierdsma died at the age of 84 in January of 1978. Rosman subsequently worked out of various small offices and then his home and even had a brief job as shop manager for Sporttoy Inc., a toy manufacturer. He formed a new partnership, Rosman and Smith with Robert H. Smith in 1939 but died on July 7, 1940 at the age of 55. Not much is known at this time about his work in the 1930's.

While additional research will reveal more about the work of Rosman and Wierdsma the partnership appears to have played a significant role in the development of large, period revival style apartment buildings, a building type that reached its apogee in Milwaukee during the 1920's

The Development of the Apartment House in Milwaukee

Apartment buildings were introduced to Milwaukee with the construction of the Belvedere in the mid-1880's, approximately sixteen years after Richard Morris Hunt designed the trend-setting Victorian Gothic-styled Stuyvesant in New York City. The Belvedere, at Eighth and Wisconsin, like the Stuyvesant, was promoted as a fashionable residential alternative for the upper middle class. In nineteenth century America, apartment living has earlier been associated with poverty and vice since in the large eastern cities immigrants and the working poor had long been housed in cheaply built tenements. Before the advent of the apartment house, single people in Milwaukee and most American cities lived at home or in respectable boarding houses until they married and set up their own households. Those in better financial situations, either well-to-do single persons or "empty nesters" would take permanent rooms in luxury downtown hotels, such as the Plankinton House. Research into city directories provides much documentation of these residential patterns. Unlike the East Coast, Milwaukee never had tenement districts and home ownership among even relatively newly arrived immigrants was high. About the closest that Milwaukee came to apartment living prior to the mid-1880" was the rowhouse, a multi-unit rental property with common walls that was widely prevalent in the central business district from the 1850's to the 1890's. Rowhouses, of course, were quite different from apartment houses since the multi-floor units were not stacked one above another but strung out horizontally in a row, with only the lack of a side yard differentiating them from the freestanding, single-family houses of the period.

The Norman flats at the northeast corner of West Wisconsin Avenue and Eighth Street followed Milwaukee's Belvedere in 1888, designed by local architect Howland Russel. In 1889 architects Crane and Barkhausen designed the large Martin Flats at the corner of East Wisconsin Avenue and North Van Buren Street. At the time, these buildings were located in desirable residential areas at the fringes of the downtown commercial area and were considered to be fashionable places to live.

Recognizing the limitations of only building luxury flats for the wealthy, local real estate investors began reaching out to widen the apartment rental market. By 1890, economic conditions in Milwaukee were right for the construction of apartment buildings for those of more moderate means. Real estate agents were interviewed in the local press about the need for inexpensive housing in a market that sorely lacked available and affordable houses to rent. By April of 1892 an Evening Wisconsin reporter stated that the recent increase in the number of apartment buildings lent Milwaukee a long-awaited "metropolitan" character. The reporter also noted that the large and expensive flats were tenanted as soon as they were built, and there continued to be a strong demand for buildings in the higher price ranges. He also noted that the demand for cheaper flats exceeded the supply indicating that apartment living had become a respectable alternative to the single family home in all strata of society.

The number of apartment buildings in Milwaukee grew significantly between 1895 and 1910. Although not all apartments may have appeared in the city directory, directory listings grow from nine buildings in 1895 to thirty-seven in 1901 to one hundred sixty-eight in 1910. By 1921 some three hundred and eleven listings are shown.

Apartment house design followed the prevailing trends of the time and examples exhibit Queen Anne, Romanesque Revival, Beaux Arts, Arts and Crafts and Prairie styles to name just a few. The typical apartment house likewise followed typical building conventions of the era as well. Ornamentation and architectural detail and the finer building materials were concentrated on the façade. If the building were situated at a corner, then there would often be two embellished facades. Detail was extended along the side elevations only enough to be visible from the street. The remainder of the side elevations as well as the rear would be treated simply and clad with common brick. If the apartment building were located in a business district, the ground floor would often be devoted to commercial or retail use.

On West Wisconsin Avenue, the location of the Biltmore, the change from an elite residential area housing many of the city's movers and shakers to a mixed use commercial and apartment district began to occur in the period 1910 to the mid 1920's. Some thirty three apartment buildings were constructed by 1926, many of modest design but a number exhibiting beautiful detail in keeping with the avenue's high class reputation. It was during this time as well that apartment planning had evolved away from the boxy monolithic forms of the early apartment houses to the garden apartment design where courtyards, walkways and plantings were incorporated to allow light, air and a more residential quality to apartment living. During this period as well, a shift away from the luxury apartment had occurred. The huge multi-bedroom apartment with accommodations for servants had become a thing of the past. The new apartments catered to the growing numbers of singles and couples with small families. Rooms were smaller, kitchen and dining areas were combined, the number of bedrooms was reduced and efficiency apartments came into existence. The Biltmore was constructed to respond to this change in demographics and was tenanted by health care workers and instructors and other white-collar employees who worked at the nearby medical and educational facilities.