

City of Madison Landmarks Commission
LANDMARKS AND LANDMARK SITES NOMINATION FORM (1)

Name of Building or Site

Common

YWCA Building

Historic (if applicable)

Belmont Hotel

Location

Street Address

101 E. Mifflin Street

Aldermanic District

Second

Classification

Type of Property (building, monument, park, etc.)

building

Zoning District

C4

Present Use

residential

Current Owner of Property (available at City Assessor's office)

Name (s)

Young Womens Christian Association

Street Address

29 N. Pinckney Street
Madison, WI 53703

Telephone Number

Legal Description (available at City Assessor's office)

Parcel Number

0709-133-3008-4

Legal Description

SW 120 feet of NW 44 feet of Lot 1,
Block 101

Condition of Property

Physical Condition (excellent, good, fair, deteriorated, ruins)

good

Altered or Unaltered?

altered

Moved or Original Site?

original site

Wall Construction

brick veneer over concrete frame

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Describe Present and Original Physical Construction and Appearance.

The former Belmont Hotel is a rectangular, flat-roofed, twelve-story building of Neo-Classical design built in 1923-24. It is a reinforced concrete framed, fireproof structure with hollow clay tile interior partitions and exterior curtain walls clad in red brick with galvanized metal and limestone trim.

It is located at the southeast corner of Pinckney and Mifflin Streets in the heart of downtown Madison on the Capitol Square. Measuring about 44 feet wide by 119 feet long, the Belmont occupies its entire corner lot on a block comprised primarily of late nineteenth century two and three story Victorian commercial structures. The Belmont is sited at the edge of a wide sidewalk with architecturally treated elevations facing west onto Pinckney Street and north onto Mifflin Street. A secondary elevation faces east onto a narrow mid-block alley. The south elevation abutting the neighboring commercial structures is devoid of architectural features except for a utilitarian arrangement of windows in an indented lightwell that is visible above the roofs of the adjacent buildings.

The north and west elevations are the most architecturally developed and share similar design features. The narrow west elevation facing the Square consists of five bays of symmetrically arranged windows distributed across a facade that is horizontally divided into three stages: base, shaft, and capital. The limestone clad base of the building comprises the basement, first story, and mezzanine. The fenestral pattern of the first floor is an asymmetrical composition consisting of a broad, double-width arched window spanning the two north bays, a central door with a transom and a pair of arched openings. These openings are trimmed with keystones and flanked with fluted pilaster strips. Above a limestone cornice, the limestone-clad mezzanine floor establishes the fenestral pattern of the first floor is an asymmetrical composition consisting of a broad, double-width arched window spanning the two north bays, a central door with a transom and a pair of arched openings. These openings are trimmed with keystones and flanked with fluted pilaster strips. Above a limestone cornice, the limestone-clad mezzanine floor establishes the fenestral pattern for all of the upper floors of the building. It consists of five bays of symmetrically arranged single and paired, one-over-one, doublehung windows. Paired fluted pilaster strips define the corners. A pair of decorative iron plaques are mounted on the wall flanking the central window above the entrance.

Above a limestone belt course are eight identical stories of red brick pierced with simple doublehung sash windows arranged in the same pattern as those on the mezzanine level. The principal ornamental features of this, the shaft portion of the building, are the vertical courses of evenly spaced projecting limestone blocks that form a dashed white line pattern against the dark red brick flanking the central and end window bays.

At the eleventh floor level a broad galvanized metal entablature sets off the top floor, or capital portion, of the building. Galvanized metal paired fluted pilaster strips define the corners and link the broad sill entablature with the building's modillion eaves cornice. The

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eleventh story windows repeat the pattern of the lower stories. A modern corrugated sheet metal sloping parapet wall girds the top of the building hiding mechanical equipment as well as the almost windowless twelfth floor added in the 1960s.

The broad Mifflin Street elevation is similar in composition to the Pinckney Street elevation. The limestone clad first story is raised on a high, fenestrated basement. The basement windows are now boarded over. Ten arched windows of various widths on the first floor are trimmed with keystones and flanked by fluted pilaster strips. The main entrance is located under a broad arched opening near the west end. An old ornamental sheetmetal canopy suspended from chains shelters the entrance.

Above the limestone cornice, the limestone clad mezzanine establishes the fenestral pattern for the upper floors. A balanced but asymmetrical arrangement of large, doublehung, one-over-one bedroom windows and smaller doublehung bathroom windows is deployed across the facade to respond to floor plan requirements. Pairs of fluted stone pilasters mark the corners of the mezzanine while a pair of ornamental iron plaques identical to those on the Pinckney Street elevation flank the windows above the building's entrance.

The eight red brick clad upper floors above the mezzanine repeat the same fenestral pattern as the mezzanine with groupings of large bedroom windows interrupted by smaller bathroom windows in single or paired configurations. Raised limestone blocks projecting from the red brick walls form a pattern of vertical dashed lines flanking the four bays of bathroom windows. The galvanized metal cornice, paired pilasters, and modillion cornice setting off the eleventh floor repeat the same scheme used on the Pinckney Street elevation.

The narrow east elevation faces a mid-block alley. Although it is somewhat visible, the east side is devoid of the ornamental features found on the north and west sides. Clad in plain red brick without limestone or iron trim, the east elevation is divided into five bays with two vertical strips of one-over-one doublehung windows flanking a central strip of small paired bathroom windows. A modest soldier course of slightly projecting brick defines the cornice.

The south elevation is comprised of blank red brick walls except for an informal arrangement of one-over-one double hung windows in the indented lightwell. The square brick chimney stack of the heating plant and the brick elevator penthouse extend above the roof of the lightwell.

In terms of its floor plan, the interior layout of the hotel was determined by the location of certain fixed structural and circulation elements including the interior column spine down the longitudinal center of the building and the placement of the east and west interior stairwells and the elevator shaft.

Vertically, the interior of the building is divided into two functional zones. The hotel's public rooms are located at the basement and first story levels, while the guest rooms occupy the mezzanine and upper nine stories. The foyer is located at mid-level inside the modern glass and

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aluminum entrance doors on Mifflin Street. It has quarry tile floors and stair treads, terrazzo wainscotting, Spanish plaster walls, and a plaster ceiling medallion. A split flight of stairs leads up to the lobby level and down to the basement restaurant level.

The basement level contains the former dining room, kitchen, restrooms, and a variety of service, storage, and mechanical spaces. The only architecturally treated space was the former dining room. A vertical board, natural oak door with old English style wrought iron strap hinges, and a diamond-patterned leaded glass window leads into the former dining room area. This space extends east along Mifflin Street with the former kitchen at its extreme east end. Basement windows placed high on the wall originally provided natural light and ventilation, but are now boarded over. The dining room has been stripped of all of its finishes except for a few patches of Spanish plaster and the remnants of the mosaic tile floor visible in places under a later vinyl tile floor. The original floor appears to have been composed of half-inch square ceramic tiles laid in a white field with a black border.

The former kitchen space has a white octagonal ceramic tile floor and a few surviving sections of shoulder height white glazed ceramic tile wainscotting and baseboard. All of the plumbing, stoves, cabinets, and some sections of the partition walls have been removed.

On the west side of the dining room foyer, beyond the stairs to the street level, are the men's and women's bathrooms. These are simply finished plaster rooms with white octagonal tile floors and ceramic tile wainscotting with a top border of narrow tiles embossed with a running vine motif.

The lobby is reached from the Mifflin Street entrance by ascending a broad flight of stairs with quarry tile treads to the first floor level. A wrought iron railing of paired twisted iron pickets alternating with speartipped pickets supporting an oak handrail borders the east side of the open stairwell. The double elevator bank is located at the top of the stairs across a wide vestibule. The lobby is a large, high-ceilinged space that extends eastward almost to the east wall of the building. The arched windows facing Mifflin Street are set within deep jambs. The original wood windows have been replaced with aluminum casements, although the original arched pebble glass transoms remain intact. Massive plaster beams span the room between the windows dividing the ceiling into five panels. A deep ribbed plaster cove moulding borders the ceiling. A painted shoulder height stone wainscot clads the smooth plaster walls. Grey marble tile with an inset black marble border paves the floor. Ornamental details include the reeded, spooltipped molded plaster corner beads, the wood picture mouldings, and the wire, glass and bronze elevator doors decorated with shield bearing panels emblazoned with the letter B for Belmont Hotel. Above the two elevator doors are the original, highly-ornamented, scroll-enframed, bronze floor indicator panels.

The former commercial space at the Pinckney Street end of the lobby floor has been converted into a modern paneled and drop-ceilinged lounge. The old hotel entrance from Pinckney Street opens into a back

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hall that connects to the main lobby through a space now occupied by the modern registration desk. The original dimensions of the lobby, which included most of the first story, have been reduced by modern partitions that have been installed to create offices and service spaces.

The upper ten guest room floors all originally had the same floor plan and finishes. Each is bisected by a double-loaded corridor extending from east to west which terminates at each end in short cross halls providing access to the two-room suites in each of the four corners. Originally each floor contained about twenty guest rooms, most of which had shared baths. In the four corners are two room suites that share a full bathroom off a semi-private foyer.

The arrangement of the shared bathrooms is interesting. Each room has a small, step-up private toilet room containing only a toilet and a sink. These toilet rooms have an outside window. The bathtub is located in a windowless interior closet-like passage between the rooms with doors opening at either end. Each room has a tiny square closet. Most of the rooms measure about nine by fourteen feet.

The guest room floor finishes are simple. The corridors have plain plaster walls and cove mouldings at the plaster ceilings. The corridor floors are bordered in a terrazzo band that curves up the wall about six inches to form the baseboard. The inset concrete floor within the raised terrazzo border has always been carpeted, as are all of the concrete floored guest rooms. A small section of mottled brown marble tile paves the area immediately in front of the elevator doors on each floor. Flat board casings surround the modern, flush oak guest room doors. The transoms above the doors have been covered or painted over. A built-in floor-to-lintel height mirror is located on each floor opposite the elevator doors. Suspended acoustical tile ceilings have been installed on some floors.

In the guest rooms, smooth plaster clads the walls and ceilings. A thin wood moulding frames the ceiling. One-panel doors with glass knobs provide access to the closets and baths. The toilet rooms and baths have white octagonal tile floors.

Most of the guest room floors have been somewhat altered from their original condition. Only the third floor, for example, still retains its original mahogany finished hall doors. On most of the other floors, dropped ceilings have been installed in the corridors, the transoms have been covered over, the hall doors to the guest rooms have been combined by removing dividing walls to create larger living quarters.

The top floor of the building was added in 1968. The addition necessitated removing the original parapet railing. The corrugated aluminum clad exterior encloses an indoor swimming pool, an exercise room, and men's and women's locker rooms. In order to accommodate the depth of the swimming pool, which was cut into the hotel roof, the eleventh floor was gutted and the remaining space remodeled as recreation rooms. The new twelfth floor is simply finished in the functional modern style of the 1960s with exposed concrete block walls, flush steel doors and frames, and concrete, ceramic tile and vinyl asbestos tile floors.

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Original Owner Piper Hotel Company	Original Use hotel
Architect or Builder Balch and Lippert	Architectural Style neo-classical revival
Date of Construction 1923-1924	Indigenous Materials Used not applicable

List of Bibliographical References Used

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- _____. "The Piper Brothers." Madison Magazine, Vol. 27, No. 8, August, 1985.

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Form Prepared By:

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Date Nomination Form Was Prepared

March 4, 1993

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List of Bibliographical References Continued:

- "Four Brothers' Grandfather Used Ox Team to Come to State." Madison Capital Times, November 12, 1938.
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- "New YW in Business; Fund Fete Today," Wisconsin State Journal, October 20, 1968.
- "Piper's Cafeteria Gone, But Host, Nostalgic Memories Remain," Madison Capital Times, January 3, 1961.
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- Piper v. Ekern, 180 WIS 586 - Supreme Court of Wisconsin, 1923.
- Rankin, Katherine H. "Hotels." Unpublished manuscript, undated, in the files of the Madison Landmarks Commission.
- "Voight Buys Belmont Hotel," Wisconsin State Journal, January 15, 1967.
- Wisconsin: Its History and Its People, 1634-1924. Chicago: S.J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1924.
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Significance of Nominated Property and Conformance to Designation Criteria:

Significance

The Belmont Hotel is architecturally significant as a good example of a 1920s commercial hotel illustrating an intermediate stage in the evolution of the hotel as a building type from the Victorian era hostelry to the modern urban hotel. It is historically important as a landmark symbolizing the rapid commercial growth and urbanization of Madison from 1910 into the 1920s as it strove to assume the physical attributes of a modern city. The Belmont Hotel is perhaps the building that best manifests the aspirations and controversy associated with that urbanization and the expansion of commerce in Madison. Its construction also precipitated landmark state legislation in Madison limiting building height around Capitol Square for aesthetic purposes.

Architectural Significance

As a building type, the Belmont is an excellent example of a commercial hotel of the period. Never intended to be a luxury hotel, the Belmont was built as a moderately priced facility to house middle-income business travelers. Its small, simply furnished rooms, with tiny closets and shared bathing facilities were designed to provide fairly basic, but comfortable, short-term sleeping facilities for businessmen. As such, it differs considerably from the resort, residential, and luxury hotels of the period, which were designed for longer occupancies. The rooms were not as large as would be found in a luxury hotel, and there were no rooms with private baths or suites with sitting rooms in the Belmont to accommodate entertaining or family visits. Although the rooms seem small and Spartan by today's standards, it is important to remember that in the days before television, hotel rooms were used for little other than sleeping and grooming by most guests, since it was the custom to utilize the lobby for reading, conversing with friends, writing letters, and other social activities. The capacious lobby of the Belmont was a homey space, furnished more like a comfortable, middle-class living room or men's club lounge than the sumptuously appointed and richly decorated showplace lobbies often found in residential and luxury hotels of the period.

The intended purpose of the structure to be a commercial hotel catering to businessmen was underscored by the lobby's chief ornament, the mural painting "The Barter," which was commissioned from artist James E. McBurney especially for the space by the hotel's builders, the Baily & Kasson Company of Chicago. This large, crescent-shaped oil painting depicted a French Canadian fur trader bartering with a band of Winnebago Indians, the tribe that had at one time lived in the Madison area. A newspaper article describing the hotel opening in 1924 emphasized the relevance of the painting, which no longer hangs in the lobby, to the function of the hotel.

"It was appropriate that the mural painting, 'Barter,' should hang in the lobby of the new Belmont Hotel. The Belmont is designed especially to be a travelling man's hotel and the painting pictures the first 'salesman' to come to Madison."¹

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The hotel offered few of the amenities that would be found in more upscale hostelries. Other than the dining room and a separate coffee shop (later a cocktail lounge), there were no ballrooms, meeting rooms, private dining rooms or banqueting facilities. It is, in short, an excellent example of a typical commercial hotel of its period representing the middle ground between the bath-down-the-hall Victorian hotelry and the full service urban luxury hotel and combines features of both. While many surviving 1920s residential and luxury hotels are being restored and preserved today because of their impressive lobbies and public spaces and more ample room sizes, the much plainer commercial hotels, such as the Belmont, are rapidly disappearing from American cities. The Belmont is a fine surviving example of the genre.

In terms of its architectural treatment, the Belmont Hotel is a modest example of 1920s Neoclassicism. Although the Belmont was an innovative structure for Madison at the time it was built in terms of its height and some of its interior features, the architecture and detailing of its exterior reflect a conservative approach to design. The red brick and limestone Neoclassical exterior treatment follows the tried-and-true columnar model then commonly used in the design of tall buildings with base, shaft, and capital horizontal divisions. The detailing and fenestral pattern are competently executed to architecturally unify the diverse interior spaces behind generally pleasing and rhythmic facades.

The interior of the structure reflects an innovative guest room scheme devised by the architects to maximize the number of rooms per floor on the compact site. Because the small building footprint would not permit each room to have a private bath without reducing the number of rentable units to an uneconomic level, the architects devised a semiprivate bathroom layout that would still satisfy the then current standards of hygiene, privacy, and amenity required of a first class commercial hotel. Each interior room was provided with a small private toilet room with a sink, while the bathtub was placed in a separate compartment that was shared by two guest rooms. In the four corners of each floor, two rooms were arranged as a suite with a common bath opening off the small, private foyer between them. This separation of bathing functions responded to the practical hygiene needs of the guests while still somewhat fulfilling the expectations of first class hotel patrons to be provided with a private bath.

The public demand for private bathing facilities in hotels had developed in the early twentieth century as a result of the influence of the hygienic movement, which had promoted the popularity of daily bathing in a germ free environment. The consequent demand for the scrubbable white tile private bathroom had led to a major change in hotel design from the hostelries of the Victorian era with their shared hall baths. Many previously fashionable Victorian hotels were either remodeled to incorporate private baths or, where this was not possible, were forced to either close or cater to a less affluent clientele. The construction of the Belmont coincided in Madison with the construction of major additions to and remodelings of older hotels and the construction of new hotels such as the Belmont and the Loraine, to accommodate patrons deserting the outmoded Victorian era establishments.

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In addition to its bathroom arrangement, the Belmont is architecturally interesting as a manifestation of the fireproof building phenomenon of the early twentieth century. Even the most cursory review of the history of the hotel industry in the United States would reveal that fire was the most serious hazard faced by the hotel proprietor and guest alike. In spite of earnest efforts by architects to provide more safe exits and to design features into hotel buildings that would slow the spread of a fire, should one occur, it was not until the perfection of reinforced concrete construction at the turn of the century that truly fireproof buildings became common. The construction and furnishing of the Belmont Hotel reflected a considerable interest in fire protection. This was particularly important since the height of the building rendered the firefighting equipment available in Madison at the time virtually useless for combatting a blaze above the fourth story level. As a result, in addition to being provided with ample exits and enclosed fire stairs, the Belmont was constructed with an absolute minimum of combustible materials. The Belmont is built of reinforced concrete with hollow clay tile partition walls covered in plaster, concrete floors covered in tile, marble or terrazzo, and very little woodwork. Even the guest room furniture was originally made of metal to reduce the amount of exposed wood. The construction of the Belmont reflects a considerable advance in fire safety consciousness over the older frame Victorian hotels that had previously provided accommodations to visitors to Madison.

Commerce

The Belmont Hotel is historically significant as a landmark structure in the commercial growth of Madison in the 1920s. The Belmont was conceived with the intention of being Madison's tallest building to help fulfill a growing demand for accommodations by business travelers. It symbolized the aspirations of Madison's business community at the time to see the town grow into a modern city, replete with those preeminent symbols of 1920s progressive urbanism, the skyscraper and the modern hotel. In this case, both attributes were combined in the same structure. Madison's business community viewed its construction as a boon to business that would expand the city's convention trade, a point explicitly stated in the newspaper stories covering its opening.

The construction of the Belmont and the Loraine hotels within the last year places the city in an advantageous position to bid for conventions because of room space.²

While tall buildings had become relatively common in Milwaukee by the 1920s, most of the smaller cities and towns still had few buildings that were more than five stories tall. As Madison entered the 1920s, one controversial structure had already been constructed that towered over its Victorian era neighbors, the nine story Gay Building (a.k.a. the Churchill Building, 1915-16) on the Capitol Square. The construction of the 11-story Belmont Hotel can be viewed as a conscious attempt to give Madison a second skyscraper, as an evocation of the modernism and prosperity of the town and to manifest its metamorphosis into a bustling commercial and industrial city. This phenomenon of tall buildings springing up in medium sized cities occurred throughout the United States in the ebullient 1920s as a manifestation of the skies-the-limit

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optimism of a period that truly believed that every regional center could become a booming commercial metropolis with a little luck and enough local boosterism. Another important motive, of course, was to afford the hotel operators a commercial advantage over their chief competitor, the Hotel Loraine, which was then under construction, by giving the Belmont the status of being the tallest building in town.

To summarize, it is noteworthy that instead of being an office building, as was often the case, Madison's tallest building was a hotel. This was particularly important for Madison boosters of the 1920s who were concerned about the impression that the city's hotel accommodations made on visitors. Although the Belmont was deprived of the status of being the city's leading hotel by the construction of the million dollar Hotel Loraine across Capitol Square, it nevertheless served the important commercial function of providing two-hundred modern rooms to cater to the growing ranks of business travelers, legislators, and conventioners. Its presence gave Madison the rare distinction of having two large modern downtown hotels at a time when many Wisconsin towns could not boast of having even one and symbolized the growing commercial importance of the town in the 1920s.

Politics/Government

An interesting aspect of the construction of the Belmont was the legal controversy its height provoked with Madison's city planners and the state legislature. The controversy about the height of the Belmont reflected a national concern then being debated by urban planners and architects about the symbolic ascendance of commercial interests over government, cultural and religious institutions in the central business districts of American cities through the construction of tall office buildings that dwarfed the spires and domes of these older institutions. The institutional response to this dilemma was often the relocation of cultural and government functions to impressive new buildings on the fringe of the downtown in landscaped City Beautiful-inspired settings out of the shadow of commerce.

In Madison, the perceived threat of ringing Capitol Square with tall commercial buildings that would dwarf the Capitol and obscure the view of its dome had arisen as early as 1911 when Madison developer Leonard Gay announced his intention to erect a tall office building on Capitol Square. The Madison Art League immediately criticized the plan because it felt the originally proposed eight-story structure would impair the view of the new capitol dome. Madison's first city planner, John Nolen, concurred, pointing out that his newly completed master plan for the city recommended banning the construction of tall buildings on Capitol Square. Nevertheless, a building permit was issued, and the Gay Building was constructed to a height of nine stories in 1915. It was the city's tallest building until the Belmont was constructed. The anti-skyscraper forces were so concerned about the precedent set by the construction of the Gay Building that they attempted to get legislation passed at the state level limited the height of buildings on Capitol Square, but the attorney general ruled that the state could only regulate construction on the basis of health and safety, not aesthetics.³

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The announcement of the construction of the eleven-story Belmont Hotel rekindled the controversy, and the anti-skyscraper forces were successful in persuading the legislature to pass a bill imposing a height limit on buildings around the square to ensure the visual primacy of the Capitol dome. The legislation was intended to be retroactive to halt construction of the rapidly rising Belmont Hotel and force it to be topped off at the newly prescribed 90-foot height limit, rather than the planned 115-foot height. The Wisconsin State Supreme Court ultimately ruled that the height limit was constitutional, but that it could not be retroactively imposed on the nearly completed Belmont, which was allowed to be finished to the planned height.⁴ An important aspect of this case in retrospect is the light it sheds on the struggle for symbolic dominancy between government and institutions on the one hand and the commercial interests on the other that was occurring in downtown Madison, as well as in other American cities, in the early twentieth century. Ultimately, commercial development triumphed over institutional land uses in the downtowns of American cities and to a large extent banished the latter to less commercially valuable sites further from the center of the city. As a result, this struggle for primacy has been largely forgotten today, but it was an important urban planning issue from the turn-of-the-century through the early 1920s in many communities. The controversy and litigation surrounding the construction of the Belmont Hotel is perhaps the most pronounced expression of it in Wisconsin.

It is also an interesting and early Wisconsin example of the use of governmental police powers to impose development restrictions on the private sector to achieve desired aesthetic results and to guide the urban development of a community. It reflects the mixed feelings that were prevalent in the early twentieth century about the desirability of tall buildings. While the business community often took pride in skyscrapers as symbols of sophisticated urbanism and progress, aestheticians and city planners often viewed tall buildings as light and air inhibiting monuments to commercial greed and private ambition that ruined the human scale and aesthetic effect of important urban spaces. These conflicting views were at the heart of the Belmont Hotel litigation. The height limit ultimately imposed has remained in effect in Madison down to the present time ensuring the continued primacy of the Belmont as the city's tallest private building.

Background History

The need for some sort of transient rental lodgings in Madison became apparent almost immediately upon the designation of the town as the new state capital in 1836. Pioneer settler Eben Peck responded to the need by taking in guests at his log cabin on South Butler Street (razed) beginning in April of 1837. This primitive hostelry was soon superseded by Madison's first true commercial hotel, the American House, built in 1838 at the northeast corner of Pinckney and East Washington Avenue. This two-story frame structure housed the first Madison session of the state legislature while the first capitol building was being erected across the street on Capitol Square. It survived until 1868 when it succumbed to fire. By that time a number of other hotels had been built in Madison. There were, in fact, seven or eight hotels of one sort or another in operation as early as 1852. Among the oldest surviving hotel

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structures extant are the former Hyers Hotel at 854 Jenifer Street (1854) and the Fess at 119-23 E. Doty Street (c.1858), although the remaining portions of the latter only date from 1883. In addition to these, there were a number of roadhouses and saloons that offered sleeping rooms.⁵

The later 1860s and 1870s were a period of growth and prosperity in Madison and more new hotels were built. This new generation of hotels included resort hotels for vacationers, downtown hotels for businessmen, and railroad hotels for travelers. The resort hotels catered to summer visitors who began to come to Madison as early as the 1850s. Most were located on or near the shores of one of Madison's several lakes and catered to a Mississippi River Valley clientele seeking to escape the oppressive heat, humidity, and disease carrying mosquitoes of the southern states. None of these hotels survive today. The railroad hotels developed in two nodes around the city's widely separated railroad stations. They were built in the years between the Civil War and 1909, and several survive today. They catered primarily to traveling salesmen as well as travelers stopping over between trains. The new downtown hotels were intended to house business visitors to the city stopping over for more than just a night or two including legislators, lobbyists, and other people traveling to Madison for business with the state government. They varied a good deal in terms of their appearance and amenities. Most were small establishments, and some were converted business blocks or enlarged residences. In general, they offered little more than sleeping rooms with shared hall baths. Some offered board at an extra charge. Perhaps the most luxurious hotel of its day was the Park Hotel, which catered to both a resort and business clientele. At any given time in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there were between ten and twenty hotels of varying types in operation in the city.⁶

Between 1910 and 1923 the population of Madison doubled from about 25,000 to over 50,000. At the same time, the growth of state government, the University of Wisconsin, the city's newly established industrial base, convention attendance, and automobile-related tourism created a demand for new hotel rooms. The Belmont was constructed to help satisfy this demand, as was its chief rival, the Hotel Loraine, and the new 162-room addition to the old Park Hotel (razed). This brief hotel construction boom was the result of more than just private enterprise recognizing a profit-making opportunity, it can also be viewed as a response to a perceived civic need to keep Madison prosperous and growing by providing modern lodging facilities. The desire to have a first class hotel was shared by the business and civic leaders of other Wisconsin cities in the 1920s, and the spearheading of the construction of such a hostelry was often undertaken in the name of civic improvement as a chamber of commerce project with the costs shared by a consortium of local stockholders. Often the hotel was named for the largest stockholder. Hotels were financed in this way in Beaver Dam, Stevens Point, and other Wisconsin cities in the 1920s.

In Madison, much of the projected \$400,000 construction cost of the Belmont Hotel was raised by the Piper family through the local sale of first mortgage bonds, rather than through the sale of stock, enabling the Pipers to retain full ownership of the hotel. The sale of the 6.5

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percent bonds was delayed until after the hotel was already under construction, possibly to assure the intended purchasers, many of whom were farmers, that a hotel was actually going to be built.⁷ Since investors could actually see what they were investing in, the bond issue was quickly subscribed. To that extent, the construction of the Belmont can be viewed as a community project.

The Piper family traces its origins in Madison to 1855 when Benjamin Piper settled on a 135-acre farm on the west side of Madison. A native of Bennington, New York, Piper had migrated to the Watertown vicinity about 1836 where he lived for almost twenty years. His son David also established himself as a farmer in the west Madison area where he raised four sons: Howard, Samuel, Alfred, and Charles. These four, who came to be known locally simply as the Piper Brothers, were responsible for constructing the Belmont Hotel.⁸

The Piper Brothers were living on their father's farm when Charles became interested in the retail grocery business. In 1892, with his father's backing, Charles became a partner in an established grocery business. Soon Charles bought out his partner and brought his brother Samuel into the business. The business prospered, partially because of its proximity to the farmer's market on East Washington Avenue and partially because of the rapport the brothers developed with the farmers as a result of their own agricultural background. These friendships were to be instrumental in enabling the Piper Brothers to raise the capital to build the Belmont Hotel decades later.

Over the years the Pipers acquired additional grocery stores in Madison and enlarged their original store. They were innovative businessmen. They developed a motorized delivery service by 1904 and, in effect, established a large and profitable chain store business with branches throughout Madison. In the process, all four of the brothers ended up working in the grocery business.

It was while acquiring new grocery store sites that the Piper Brothers bought the buildings that would bring them into the hotel business. In 1910, the Pipers moved one of their grocery stores to the former Joseph Kaiser Fair Store at the southeast corner of Mifflin and Pinckney Streets, the future site of the Belmont Hotel. They also bought the old F.A. Ogden Block on the northwest corner of Pinckney and Mifflin Streets near one of their other grocery stores. The Ogden Block was a five-story building that had been built in 1855 and enlarged about 1863. There were stores on the street level, and the upper stories were being operated as a hotel by the 1870s. Known as the Madison Hotel when they purchased it, the Pipers renamed it the Belmont and built a seven-story addition to the rear facing Pinckney Street in 1918. Because of its Capitol Square location and the skillful management of its proprietor, H.H. Hile, it was a successful hotel. While Hile managed the old Belmont, which had one hundred rooms, the Pipers concentrated on operating their grocery store chain and bakery business and diversified into the restaurant business. They opened a cafeteria in the Ogden Block called the Home Cafe.⁹

As Capitol Square became obsolete as a location for retail grocery stores, the Pipers began to consider alternative uses for the old Kaiser

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Fair Store building. It was H.H. Hile who suggested that the time was right to build a major hotel on Capitol Square.¹⁰ By pointing out the growing number of visitors to Madison, the market for accommodations for legislators and lobbyists, and the antiquated nature of the city's hotels, Hile appealed to the Pipers' entrepreneurial instincts, and they soon determined to build the present Belmont Hotel on the site of the old Fair Store. The Pipers hired local architects Balch and Lippert to design the new 200-room hotel.

Because of the threatened height limit and the ensuing litigation with the state legislature, the construction of the hotel proceeded at a furious pace, and the structure was completed in only nine months. When it opened in September of 1924, the hotel contained 200 rooms, a florist shop in the lobby, a coffee shop, and the Old English Room restaurant in the basement. Its rooms were rented for between \$2.00 and \$3.00 a night to businessmen, lobbyists, and legislators, some of whom also reportedly maintained offices in the building. The hotel was a successful commercial venture and soon became the principal enterprise of the four Piper brothers, who sold their five-store grocery chain in 1929. Over the years, various Piper brothers, their widows, and other relatives also made the hotel their home. For a number of years after the opening of the New Belmont, as it was originally called, the Pipers continued to operate the old Belmont as the Belmont Annex, with H.H. Hile as manager of both. The old Belmont was eventually renamed the Madison Hotel and continued in operation into the 1950s. The building has since been razed. In 1930 the Pipers opened a cafeteria in the former German Methodist Church across from the Belmont at Mifflin and Webster Streets. The Piper Garden Cafeteria was a well-known eatery until it was razed in 1960 to provide parking for the Belmont Hotel.

Until January of 1967 the Belmont Hotel remained the property of the Piper family. By then, most of the brothers had died, and the last surviving brother, Howard Piper, and the other Piper heirs sold the hotel to a Madison businessman, Floyd Voight.¹¹ Voight sold the Belmont to the YWCA in 1968 in exchange for the latter's State Street property and additional compensation. The YWCA undertook a major \$300,000 renovation of the structure, altering the lobby and adding the twelfth floor swimming pool in 1968. The hotel room floors were retained as sleeping rooms for women. The second floor was remodeled into meeting rooms and offices while the Old English Room became a cabaret-type recreation room. Today the YWCA is again renovating the building to better serve its current use as a single-room occupancy, women's residence. The athletic facilities and other YWCA functions have been relocated elsewhere.

The Architects

Balch and Lippert, the designers of the Belmont Hotel, were the principals of a Madison architectural firm that was in practice from about 1916 into the late 1940s. From the known commissions of the firm, it appears to have worked extensively on residential projects including both houses and apartment building. Balch and Lippert is also known to have designed numerous small commercial buildings, a few industrial buildings (including the National Register listed Madison Pumping Station) and some warehouses, garages, public schools, and hydroelectric

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power plants and electric substations. The firm's busiest years appear to have been the later 1920s. In terms of architectural styles, Balch and Lippert was typical of many similar firms in that its earliest known designs reflected the influence of the rapidly waning Prairie Style. By the 1920s they employed Commercial, Neoclassical, and period revival styles for their buildings. Balch and Lippert worked mostly in Madison but did execute some commissions in other Wisconsin communities.¹² It was never considered to be one of Wisconsin's leading architecture firms. The Belmont Hotel would have to be considered as one of their major works.

Harold Charles Balch was born in Neillsville, Wisconsin, to Rella and Nettie Balch. His father, Rella, was co-owner of a department store. Harold Balch studied art and architecture at the Armour Institute and at the Art Institute in Chicago before going to work for Walter Burley Griffin, a well known Prairie School architect practicing in Chicago at that time. In 1913 Balch moved to Madison to work as a junior partner with an established architect, J.O. Gordon. The firm became known as Gordon and Balch.

Grover Henry Lippert was the son of German immigrant George Lippert who operated butcher shops successively in Madison and Neillsville, Wisconsin. In 1905 Lippert's father moved to Timber Lake, South Dakota, where he also operated a butcher shop until his death in 1920. Grover Lippert stayed in Wisconsin and apprenticed with an architect for seven years after graduating from Neillsville High School in 1906. In 1913 he enrolled in the architecture school at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. After taking a degree in 1915, he joined the Madison architectural firm of Gordon and Balch, which then became Gordon, Balch, and Lippert. It is likely that Lippert knew Balch from their high school days together in Neillsville.

After J.O. Gordon's death in 1915 Balch and Lippert continued the firm. Lippert was an easygoing man who enjoyed country life and choral music and was an accomplished vocalist. Balch appears to have been the more skilled designer of the two and took considerable pride in his membership in the Beaux Arts Institute of Design of New York City.¹³ Balch and Lippert apparently had a falling-out about 1925, and each established separate firms. By 1927 they had reunited and continued the business until about 1949, when Lippert either died or retired. Balch kept the office open into 1950 and then became associated with the architectural firm of Mead and Hunt until shortly before his death.¹⁴

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Footnotes

¹"New Hotel Opens," Madison Capital Times, Sept. 19, 1924, p.1.

²Ibid.

³Mollenhoff, David V., Madison: A History of the Formative Years. Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, Dubuque, Iowa, 1982, p. 351.

⁴Piper V. Ekern, 180 WIS 586 - Supreme Court of Wisconsin, 1923.

⁵Rankin, Katherine H. "Hotels." Unpublished manuscript, undated, in the files of the Madison Landmarks Commission, p. 15.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Custer, Frank A., "The Piper Brothers," Madison Magazine, Vol. 27, No. 8, August, 1985, p. 61.

⁸"Four Brothers' Grandfather Used Ox Team to Come to State." Madison Capital Times, Nov. 12, 1938.

⁹Custer, Frank A. "Hard Knocks Hit Pipers, But Never Downed Them." Madison Capital Times, Feb. 5, 1958.

¹⁰Custer, Frank A. "The Piper Brothers," Madison Magazine, Vol. 27, No. 8, August, 1985, p. 59-60.

¹¹"Voight Buys Belmont Hotel," Wisconsin State Journal, Jan. 15, 1967.

¹²Files of the Madison Landmarks Commission: Architects.

¹³Wisconsin: Its History and Its People. Chicago, S.J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1924, pp. 326-328; pp. 404-406.

¹⁴Madison City Directory, 1948, 1949, 1950.