

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

I. Name of Building or Site

(1) Common  
Fess Hotel

(2) Historic (if applicable)  
Fess Hotel

II. Location

(1) Street Address  
123 E. Doty Street

(2) Ward (available @ City Clerk)  
4th

III. Classification

(1) Type of Property (building, monument, park, etc.)  
Building - Hotel

(2) Zoning District  
C4

(3) Present Use  
vacant, in process of rebuilding

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

(1) Name(s)  
Arabesque

(2) Street Address  
same

(3) Telephone Number  
256-0263

V. Legal Description (available at City Assessor's office)

(1) Parcel Number  
0709-242-0208-2

(2) Legal Description  
Lot 4. Block 105 of Original Plat

VI. Condition of Property

(1) Physical Condition (excellent, good, fair, deteriorated, ruins)  
With completion of remodeling, should be excellent

(2) Altered or Unaltered?  
altered

(3) Moved or Original Site?  
Hotel began on Lot 3 and was expanded, rebuilt, etc. on Lot 4

(4) Wall Construction  
brick

(5) On a separate sheet of paper, describe the present and original physical construction and appearance (limit 500 words).

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LANDMARKS AND LANDMARK SITES NOMINATION FORM (2)

**VI.(5) Describe Present and Original Physical Construction and Appearance:**

The Fess hotel looks very different today than when the business developed in the late 1850's. At that time, George Fess occupied only structures on Lot 3 (south and adjacent to the present building). Tax records indicate that Fess bought the buildings in 1856 and the lot was purchased later in 1859 or 1860.

Buildings on Lot 3 were expanded and remodelled at various times and included brick and frame structures. In 1871, Fess enlarged his hotel accommodations by the construction of a two-story, 30 x 60 foot cream (brick) building on Lot 3. In 1880 the hotel had 34 guest rooms and could accommodate 60 horses in the livery business. Having remarried following the death of her husband George, Mrs. Anna Fess Doolittle in 1883 purchased the two buildings on the SW 1/2 of Lot 4 (the two-story portion of the existing structure) and a cream brick facade was added to match the existing facade of the hotel buildings on Lot 3, and the interior was converted to hotel rooms.<sup>1</sup> By this time the Fess Hotel establishment included an ice house and livery barns extending through to E. Wilson Street, which were operated by Edward Fess, son of George Fess (Sr.).

In 1889 or 1900 George Fess Jr. purchased the remaining half of Lot 4 (present location) and in 1901 commenced upon a major remodeling--rebuilding. It appears that much of the existing buildings on this lot were incorporated in the finished hotel during this \$14,000 remodelling. The present abutting walls are quite thick, in some places there are three courses of brick, a layer of plaster and wall paper and more layers of brick followed by plaster and wall paper. At this time the NE half of the building was built to three stories with its new facade of rose colored St. Louis brick with the bay windows. The present exterior of the building has been altered very little since 1901. With the recent sand-blasting, repainting and replacement of old windows, the facade is like new.

The new interior and rear portions of the hotel are greatly changed from former times. The back portion of the hotel has been completely removed and the interior gutted. Both are currently being rebuilt to include a restaurant and cocktail lounge, elegant hotel rooms, a roof garden, and a new interior court yard. With the exception of the cocktail lounge, all of the former were included in some form following the 1901 remodelling.

The buildings on Lot 3 were sold between 1903 and 1908 and more remodellings were undertaken on the remaining Lot 4 portions in 1908 and 1924.

<sup>1</sup> These "existing buildings" were probably built between 1854 and 1858.

City of Madison Landmarks Commission  
**LANDMARKS AND LANDMARK SITES NOMINATION FORM (3)**

**VII. Significance**

**(1) Original Owner**  
 George E. Fess

**(2) Original Use**  
 Hotel

**(3) Architect or Builder**  
 Unknown, but architects Gordon and Paunack worked on 1901 rebuilding.

**(4) Architectural Style**  
 Victorian

**(5) Date of Construction** Oldest part of existing structures date to 1858 or perhaps 1854, approximately.

**(6) Indigenous Materials Used**  
 rubble foundation and brick

**(7) On a separate sheet of paper, describe the significance of the nominated property and its conformance to the designation criteria of the Landmarks Commission Ordinance (33.01), limit of 500 words.**

**VIII. List of Bibliographical References Used**

1. Butterfield, C.W., History of Dane County, 1880, p. 970.
2. Dane County Biographical Review, Chicago, 1893, p. 467-69.
3. Durrie, Daniel Steele, A History of Madison... to July 1874, Madison, Wis, 1874, pp. 77, 346.
4. Interviews, Mrs. Marie Fess Spence and Mr. Perry D. Fess.
5. Madison Building Inspection Files.
6. Madison Street Directories, 1885, 1859, 1871-72, 77-78.
7. Madison Tax Records, 1841-60, 1865, 1872, 1884, 1900, 1908.
8. Sanborn Insurance Maps, 1885, 1898, 1902, 1908.
9. Weekly Wisconsin Patriot, Vol. 1, No. 23, Sat., November 18, 1854.
10. Wisconsin State Journal, Madison Past and Present, 1902.

**IX. Form Prepared By:**

**(1) Name and Title**

Leigh H. Mollenhoff, Chairman, Madison Landmarks Commission

**(2) Organization Represented (if any)**

Madison Landmarks Commission

**(3) Address**

1501 Morrison Street

**(4) Telephone Number**

255-2234

**(5) Date Nomination Form Was Prepared**

8-23-75

11. Wisconsin State Journal, Apr. 21, 1859, 1871 (Bldgs), Dec. 6, 1875, July 18, 1883, June 5, July 16, 17, & 31, Sept. 28, Oct. 9, Nov. 7, Dec. 30, 1901, Feb. 15, 1902, also June 3, 1973 and Nov. 26, 1974.

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LANDMARKS AND LANDMARK SITES NOMINATION FORM (4)

**VII. (7) Significance of Nominated Property and Conformance to Designation Criteria:**

Though the appearance of the Fess Hotel lends a touch of New Orleans to the Capitol Square area with its pleasing brick work, wrought iron balconies, and interior court yard, the major significance of the Fess Hotel is the continuous role it has played in the historical development of Madison. Beginning in the late 1850's, it has one of the longest records of service to the public of any business establishment in the city. For well over a century, it has served as a popular hotel and eating place for the downtown area. When the present restoration-rebuilding is completed, the hotel will be in excellent condition and should continue to serve for many more years.

George E. Fess, the hotel's founder is a good example of the poor immigrant who came to the middle west and after much hardship and with great industriousness, made good. Born in Gloucestershire, England in 1816, Fess came to America in the late 1830's and went to Milwaukee where he secured a position as a steward on a Michigan Lake steamer. In 1842 he came to Madison and worked as a cook in Webster's restaurant. He moved on to a similar job with the American House and also worked as a caterer to Governor Farwell. Next he operated a grocery business on the NW part of the square and perhaps a restaurant also. In 1856 he moved the business to Lot 3, Block 105, next to the present hotel, where he also ran an "eating house." The Clymer Street (Doty) locale was the busiest area in the capitol city and was thought to be one of the most valuable from a business stand point.

Exactly when George Fess started lodging visitors is not known, but it seems probable that the boarding business was an outgrowth of the other two businesses. (Mr. Fess's own dwelling on the same site is very interesting as it was built in 1838 and was first used by the commissioners who came to superintend the erection of the old capitol as their office.)

Never catering to the wealthy or "upper crust" lodger, the Fess lodged and fed all variety of visitors, mostly common everyday people. Juries, legislators, traveling salesmen, weekly boarders -- all took rooms in the Fess. Its close proximity to the railroad stations and reasonable rates made it a natural stop for rail passengers. In the 1880's a room could be had for \$1.40 a day and 40¢ would buy a meal. Carrie Nation stayed in the Fess in 1901 because it did not have a bar, though there were several saloons within a stone's throw.

Known as the Central Hotel from 1901-1911, many interesting events took place at the Fess. The Fess boys were "dandies" and were active in the more daring activities of turn-of-the-century Madison. The ice-boating and horse racing enthusiasts swapped tales in a room above the livery and the hotel served as a center for the fast horse crowd in Madison.

Designation of the Fess is important also as an encouragement to wise recycling and adaptive-use preservation. The new owners have been sensitive to using the best and most usable of the old, consequently retaining charm and character while modernizing and preparing for more years of service.