FHR-8-300 (11-78)

B-3706

United States Department of the Interior
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service

For HCRS use only
received
date entered 1/16

National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

1. Name

historic: Chamber of Commerce Building

and/or common: Chamber of Commerce Building

2. Location

street & number: 17 Commerce Street — N/A not for publication

city, town: Baltimore — N/A vicinity of — congressional district: Third

state: Maryland — code: 24 — county: independent city — code: 510

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use	
___ district	___ public	X occupied	___ agriculture	___ museum
X building(s)	X private	___ unoccupied	X commercial	___ park
___ structure	___ both	___ work in progress	___ educational	___ private residence
___ site	Public Acquisition	Accessible	___ entertainment	___ religious
___ object	___ in process	X yes: restricted	___ government	___ scientific
	___ being considered	___ yes: unrestricted	___ industrial	___ transportation
	X not applicable	___ no	___ military	___ other:

4. Owner of Property

name: RGBV Associates, Edmund B. Vinson

street & number: 7000 Security Boulevard, Suite 316

city, town: Baltimore — N/A vicinity of — state: Maryland — 21207

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc.: Baltimore City Courthouse

street & number: North Calvert Street

city, town: Baltimore — state: Maryland — 21202

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title: Maryland Historical Trust Historic Sites Survey — has this property been determined eligible? X yes ___ no

date: 1982 — ___ federal X state ___ county ___ local

depository for survey records: Maryland Historical Trust, 21 State Circle

city, town: Annapolis — state: Maryland — 21401

7. Description

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Condition		Check one	Check one
excellent	deteriorated	unaltered	X original site
X good	ruins	X altered	moved date
fair	unexposed		

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

DESCRIPTION SUMMARY

The Chamber of Commerce Building is a 1904-1905 Renaissance Revival red brick building five floors in height. It has a low-pitched roof which is supported by steel trusses but largely hidden from view by a heavily corniced parapet. The building is eleven bays in its long (north-south) dimension and three bays wide. The east and west facades are mirror images of each other with an entrance in the third bay from the north. The south facade is symmetrical with an entrance in the center bay similar to those on the east and west. The north facade is similar to the south facade but with no entrance. The building totally occupies the site which slopes gently to the south and east. The interiors of the building are organized along a central corridor about twelve feet wide and running north-south from the elevators at the north end of the building. Each office has a masonry walk-in vault and cherry office doors with large transoms on the corridor. The original plaster coffered ceilings throughout the building have been partially covered by suspended ceilings. The fourth floor, the trading floor, has an ornate wooden entrance facing the elevator lobby. The fifth floor, a partial floor, was formerly a mezzanine over the trading floor. It contains an open light-well in the floor directly below an ornate skylight in the ceiling. The railings around the light-well and stairwells are of ornate cast-iron with wooden cap rails.

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

The Chamber of Commerce Building is a neo-Renaissance brick bearing-wall building five floors in height. It has a low-pitched roof which is supported by steel trusses but largely hidden from view by a heavily corniced parapet. The building is eleven bays in its long (north-south) dimension and three bays wide. The east and west facades are mirror images of each other, with an entrance in the third bay from the north. The south facade is symmetrical, with an entrance in the center bay similar to those on the east and west. The north (alley) facade is similar to the south facade, but with no entrance. The building totally occupies its site, which slopes gently to the south and east. Basement windows, once opened into areaways on the east and west. These are now covered by public sidewalk and the windows sealed. The brick superstructure is bedded on a granite base which meets the sidewalk. Above the base, the first and second floors are rusticated by the indentation of every eighth brick course. Windows on these floors are double-hung, with terra-cotta flat arched lintels with projecting keystones. Above the second story is an egg-and-dart terra-cotta string course, defining the three upper stories. These stories are tied together with high arched windows with terra-cotta spandrels at the fourth floor, and by fluted terra-cotta pilasters between the windows, which are doubled where they meet the projecting end bays at all four corners. The end bays, which project almost a foot, are somewhat wider than the typical bays. They are quioned at each return with terra-cotta quoins. The pilasters on each facade support an architrave above the arched windows, with a frieze and a dentiled cornice. The frieze contains a terra-cotta shield in each end bay. The entrance doors are recessed in a vestibule, which

SEE CONTINUATION SHEET #1

GENERAL DESCRIPTION (Continued)

opens under a heavy lintel supported at each side by a pilaster and a free-standing terra-cotta column, both of which are fluted and banded. All columns and pilasters are of the Ionic order. There are also basement entrances on the east and west sides in the second bay from the south end. These also enter through vestibules, the openings of which are supported by terra-cotta brackets.

The interiors of the building are organized along a central corridor, about twelve feet wide, running north-south from the elevators which are located at the north end of the building. Each office has a masonry walk-in vault and cherry office doors with large transoms on the corridor. The original plaster coffered ceilings throughout the building have been partially covered by suspended ceilings. The fourth floor, originally the trading floor, has an ornate wooden entrance facing the elevator lobby. The fifth floor, which is a partial floor, was formerly a mezzanine over the trading floor. It contains an open light-well in the floor, directly below an ornate skylight in the ceiling above. The railings around the light-well and stairwells are of ornate cast iron with wooden cap rails.

8. Significance

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Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below			
___ prehistoric	___ archeology-prehistoric	___ community planning	___ landscape architecture	___ religion
___ 1400–1499	___ archeology-historic	___ conservation	___ law	___ science
___ 1500–1599	___ agriculture	___ economics	___ literature	___ sculpture
___ 1600–1699	X architecture	___ education	___ military	___ social/humanitarian
___ 1700–1799	___ art	___ engineering	___ music	___ theater
___ 1800–1899	X commerce	___ exploration settlement	___ philosophy	___ transportation
X 1900–	___ communications	___ industry	___ politics/government	___ other (specify)
		___ invention		

Specific dates 1904–1905 Builder Architect Charles E. Cassell, arch.

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph) Applicable Criteria: A, C

SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY

The significance of the Chamber of Commerce Building derives from its architectural character and its historic role in Baltimore history. As a structure designed in the Renaissance Revival manner, the building displays certain distinctive features, primarily decorative, that were commonly employed during the rebuilding of the financial area in Baltimore following the Great Fire in 1904. These features include rustication; quoining; dentil, egg-and-dart, and modillion cornices; and pilasters. Certain points, however, separate the Chamber of Commerce Building from the other structures in the district. These points include a horizontal quality as opposed to the verticality that generally marks the area and being primarily a red brick structure in an area dominated by stone. Significance is also derived from association with the city's commercial history. The building was constructed as a grain trading center with a trading room on the upper floor and offices for traders and exporters below. For many years during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Baltimore was the nation's leading exporter of flour and cereal grains. It's deepwater port at the railhead of the Pennsylvania, Western Maryland and B & O lines gave it a natural preeminence. During that period, before the era of modern communication, the focal point of the flow of trade was the exchange floor of the Baltimore Chamber of Commerce. This building is the second grain trading center to occupy this site. The first one was erected in the 1880s and is said to have been similar in design to the present structure. Following the 1904 fire, the association elected to continue in the same location and employed Charles Cassell of Baltimore to prepare drawings for the new building. Construction was begun in the summer of 1904.

HISTORY AND SUPPORT

For many years during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Baltimore was the nation's leading exporter of flour and cereal grains. Its deepwater port at the railhead of the Pennsylvania, Western Maryland and B & O lines gave it a natural preeminence. During that period, before the era of modern communication, the focal point of the flow of trade was the exchange floor of the Baltimore Chamber of Commerce.

The Chamber began its evolution in 1846 as a loosely organized group of merchants who met daily on Bowley's Wharf in order to standardize corn and grain prices. Previously, most of the grain trading in Baltimore, which was basically a local market, was transacted in the counting rooms of the various merchants. But in that year, famine in Ireland created a large export market and caused prices to fluctuate wildly.

HISTORY AND SUPPORT (Continued)

The Bowley's Wharf traders met in the open air, displaying grain samples on barrel heads and window ledges. On a cold day in February, 1853, a general meeting proposed the formation of a regular exchange. By the following week, one hundred thirty-seven merchants had subscribed. The group acquired two buildings at 77 and 79 South Street. Sub-letting the upper floors, they combined the first floors of both buildings into a hall which became the Baltimore Corn and Flour Exchange.

The organization survived opposition in the Maryland General Assembly, many of whose members saw the cartel as detrimental to the interests of local farmers. In April, 1855, the Superior Court of Baltimore granted a formal charter, allowing the Exchange to hold capital up to $50,000. At this time, there wwere already 350 members.

The exchange quickly outgrew its makeshift quarters, and was so successful that by May, 1860, it had moved into its own building. This was the new Grafflin Building on South Street between Pratt Street and Bowley's Wharf. Virtually on the docks, the windows of the new Exchange afforded a perfect view of cargo operations in the port.

In 1872, the B & O Railroad constructed the City's first grain elevator, which had a capacity of half a million bushels, and business continued to boom. Ten years later, the Exchange had again outgrown its building, and a new location, a piece of property "bound by 2nd Street, Post Office Avenue, Holliday Street, and an Avenue recently cut through", was purchased. Many of the old members protested against this site, which was visually isolated from the harbor. The objections were overcome, however, and the new building of granite, brick and iron opened its doors on November 22, 1882. This building, like the present building, had a huge exchange floor, the "Great Hall" at the fourth floor.

In 1896 the Corn and Flour Exchange changed its name to the Baltimore Chamber of Commerce. Grain trading continued as its principal activity, but a maritime information service was added. It was hoped, at the time, that other trade associations would join, but this did not take place. Thus, the title, Chamber of Commerce is something of a misnomer. The Baltimore Association of Commerce, formed in 1924 by the merger of the Merchants and Manufacturers Association with the Board of Trade of Baltimore and the Export and Import Board of Trade, is the organization which fulfills the traditional role of a Chamber of Commerce. The similarity of the names of the two organizations still causes considerable confusion.

HISTORY AND SUPPORT (Continued)

The Great Baltimore Fire of 1904 destroyed the above ground portion of the 1882 Chamber Building, along with most of downtown Baltimore. Only the foundations and the heavy masonry security vaults survived the fire, together with all the contents of the vaults. Firemen, scaling the walls with ladders, opened the safes and brought the valuables down intact. The masonry vaults and 1882 foundations were preserved in the design for the new building.

The day after the Great Fire was extinguished, the Chamber of Commerce reopened for business in temporary quarters in the Masonic Building. This was viewed by the business community as a tremendous vote of confidence in the renewal of the City.

Charles Cassell, a prominent local architect, was chosen to surpervise the reconstruction of the Chamber Building at the same location. As rebuilt, the Chamber had a two-story trading hall on the fourth floor, three main entrances at street level, and two basement entrances. The south end of the basement was designed as a rathskeller for business lunches. The north end houses the building's mechanical and electrical services, including two water-powered hydraulic elevators, still in operation today. They are the only remaining water-powered elevators in Baltimore.

The first, second and third floors of the building housed offices of the various grain merchants and shipping companies. The communicating offices were lit by huge windows, extending to the ceiling. The entire building, except for the roof structure, is of fireproof construction, with steel structural members encased in concrete.

On the fourth floor, the Exchange's executive offices opened onto the vast Trading Hall. Running half its length on one side was a row of telegraph offices and telephone booths. Above these, on the balcony, was the big blackboard on which Chicago and Liverpool grain market prices were chalked by two men following a ticker-tape. On the other side of the hall were long rows of high, square polished wood tables. Each of these was the trading post of one of the member merchants. On the tables, in numbered bags, were samples of the wheat, rye, oats and barley stored in the City's grain elevators. In one corner of the hall stood a weather map, vital in predicting market fluctuations. Another corner, railed off from the main floor, was used as a newspaper reading room. Across the front of the room were enclosed booths, each with its own telegraph office, for the larger grain firms.

SEE CONTINUATION SHEET #4

HISTORY AND SUPPORT (Continued)

The staff of the Chamber kept the board up-to-date on all grain shipments into and out of Baltimore. All incoming shipments were inspected at the grain elevators and warehouses, and samples were sent to the exchange floor in small paper bags. Prices were set three times daily; the morning call at 10:45 was taken shortly after opening bids were received from the Chicago grain exchange. The noon call fixed the day's "settling price", and the last call at 2:15, set the closing quotation. Each call was preceded by the tone of a gong at the rostrum.

Up through the 1930s, the trading floor would be packed daily with bankers, railroad and steamship men, as well as grain dealers. But by the 1950s, the trading hall had become a cavernous, empty space, with two elderly gentlemen still writing the day's quotations on the big board. Several influences had combined to end the era of the muncipal grain exchange. The first was the advent of the telephone. Instant communication alleviated the need to trade in person. Another influence was the creation in 1929 of the Federal Farm Board, which siphoned business out of private hands. The Federal Government quickly became the nation's largest grain trader. A third reason for Baltimore's decline as a grain trading port was government regulation of railroad rates, which favored other ports such as Norfolk and Boston.

The Great Hall was leased to a publishing firm, which partitioned and inserted a false ceiling, obscuring the upper part of the exchange floor. The room is still basically intact, with arched windows and coffered plaster ceilings above the contemporary 2' X 4' suspended ceiling. The freight elevator, near the south end of the building was abandoned and the shaft converted into janitor's closets. Many of the first, second and third floor offices were also "modernized" by the addition of a hung ceiling. The building today is largely occupied by small shipping companies and freight forwarders, many of whom still do business related to the grain trade.

9. Major Bibliographical References

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Maryland Historical Trust Historic Sites Inventory: Baltimore City
Files of the Baltimore Commission for Historic and Architectural Preservation
City Hall, Baltimore, Maryland

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of nominated property less than one acre

Quadrangle name Baltimore East, Maryland

Quadrangle scale 1:24,000

UMT References

	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
A	18	361160	4349870	B			
C				D			
E				F			
G				H			

Verbal boundary description and justification The property is the city lot on which it stands and is bounded by Water Street on the south, Commerce Street and Custom House Avenue on the west and east respectively, and an alley on the north.

List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

state N/A code county code

state code county code

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Marc Schabb

organization Myers and D'Aleo, Inc. date March 1982

street & number 108 Water Street telephone (301) 752-7848

city or town Baltimore state Maryland

12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

___ national ___ state X local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature 12-17-82

title STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER date

For HCRS use only

I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

date

Keeper of the National Register

date

Attest:

Chief, Registration

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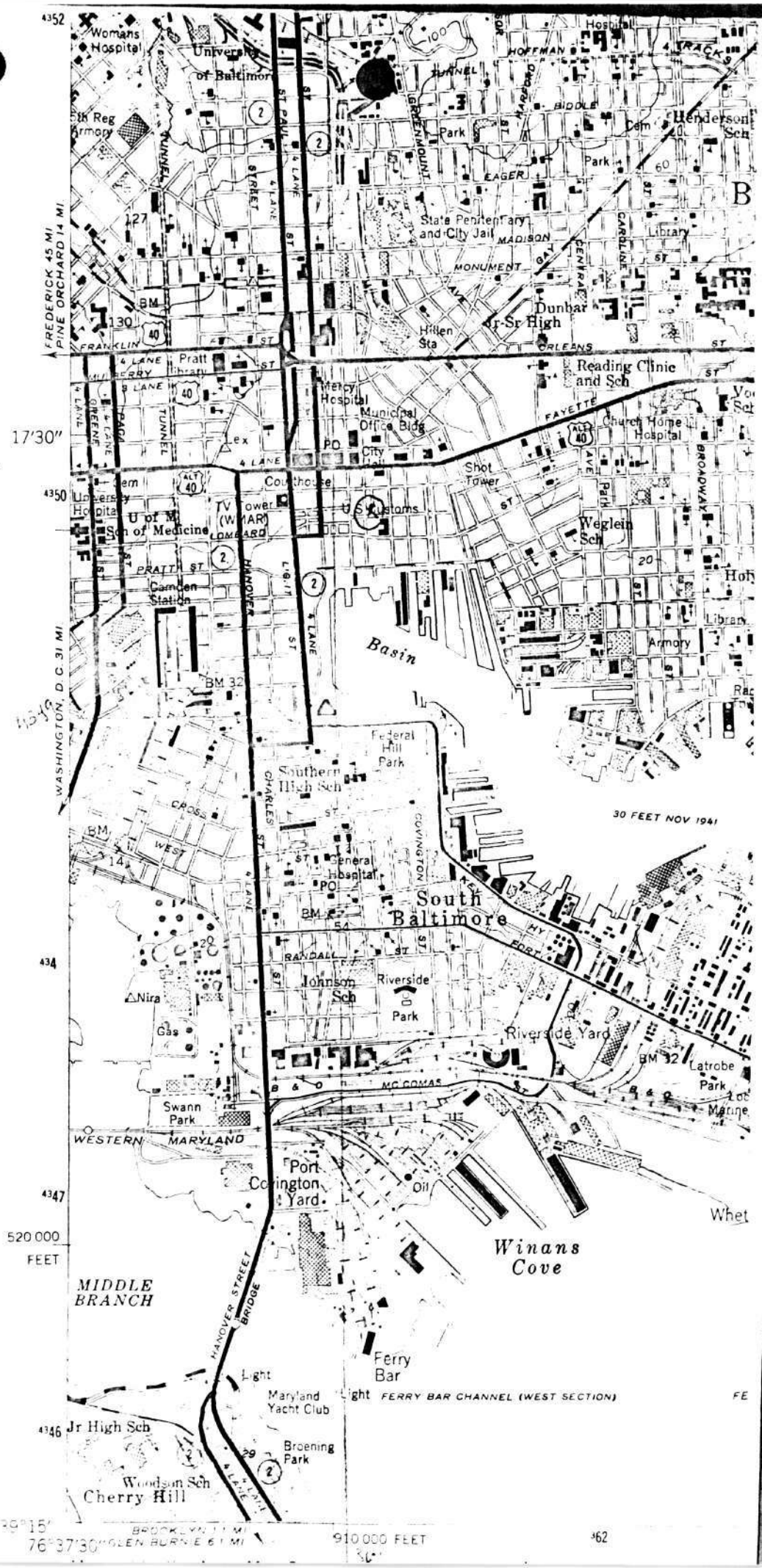
Chamber of Commerce
Baltimore
Maryland

A 18/361160/4349870



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CHAMBER OF COMMERCE BUILDING

Baltimore East Quadrangle

Mapped by the Army Map Service