

Introduction

In the early 2000s, preservationists in the Wildwoods recognized the importance of motels in the history of this vibrant shore resort destination. These mid-century budget vacation spots were facing tremendous pressures as new waves of tourism and development overtook the shore economy. The Motels of the Wildwoods survey and resulting Multi Property Documentation Format National Register nomination were designed to identify, document, and preserve a uniquely Jersey Shore cultural resource. While the survey and nomination succeeded in promoting the Doo-Wop ideal and aesthetic, they may not have been as successful as originally hoped in preserving the abundant examples that once existed in Wildwood Crest, Wildwood, and North Wildwood. Analysis in 2018 by Stephanie Hoagland, one of the original authors of the survey and nomination, noted over 30% of the motels surveyed had been demolished. HPO review of these resources in 2024 shows that 37% have been demolished, and at least 6 % have been unsympathetically altered to remove the unique Doo-Wop character that is such a special part of the Wildwoods experience.

The History of Wildwoods

Excerpts from "Preservation Stagnation on the Jersey Shore," by Stephanie Hoagland, 2018

The Wildwoods are comprised of three municipalities, North Wildwood City, Wildwood City, and Wildwood Crest Borough, located on a six-mile-long barrier island at the southern tip of New Jersey. Their histories mirror that of many American seaside resort towns. They were founded between 1880 and 1905, primarily by land developers who saw the island as a great location for a summer resort and "Cottage Colony." The name "Wildwood" was given to the communities by Philip Pontius Baker in honor of the dense twisted forest growth that covered the island at the time of their founding. An early real estate brochure lists Wildwood Beach as "a veritable forest by the sea." The growth of The Wildwoods was slow until the introduction of reliable railroad service in 1889. These trains brought visitors from the nearby urban areas of Philadelphia, but also areas further afield such as Connecticut and New York City. The years between the end of World War II and the end of the Eisenhower Administration were the heyday of The Wildwoods, bringing an explosion in visitors, record crowds, and unequalled growth. Although attendance records for the early 1950s placed The Wildwoods in third place behind Atlantic City and Asbury Park for New Jersey destinations, the number of visitors to The Wildwoods increased nearly every season. Crowds of more than 150,000 on holiday weekends were not uncommon and during the July 4th holiday in 1952, officials counted 50,000 automobiles and estimated the crowds to number 300,000. (1)

History of Motels in Wildwoods

Excerpts from "Preservation Stagnation on the Jersey Shore," by Stephanie Hoagland, 2018

Motel construction in The Wildwoods began in earnest in the late 1940s. The first motels, were designed like apartment units. These motels were primarily two-story rectangular boxes with prominent balconies lacking many of the amenities that would later be seen such as swimming pools and on-site parking. The term "motel" did not come into popular use until the 1950s. The earliest motels had names such as cottages, courts, lodges, and apartments. The greatest boost to the resort was the opening of the Garden State Parkway in 1955, which ran vertically across the state from the New York state line in the north, down to Cape May at the south. Upon its completion, it was estimated that the Parkway would bring an additional 349,000 automobiles to The Wildwoods each season. The mid-to-late 1950s saw not only an increase in the number of motels being built on the island, but also a change in style. These new motels were attracting families by offering amenities such as playgrounds, Ping-Pong tables, kitchenettes, and miniature golf. They were often two-stories, L-shaped in plan, set back into the property line, and with the office located at an end closest to the street. The always-present pool was tucked into the crook of the "L" with pull-in parking, one for each unit, along the street. Many of these motels were modeled after designs seen in Florida and especially Miami Beach.

Between 1955 and 1964, over 200 motels were built on the island. Much of what made these motels so visually stimulating were their embellishments, the superficial decorations that were added to the plain concrete block walls to differentiate one motel from the next. It was what gave that specific motel a sense of place on an island filled with hundreds of other motels identical in body and plan. The embellishments could include wonderful neon signage in front, or in some cases perched upon the roof to be clearly seen from the street; colorful lighting around the pool; decorated soffits under the balconies; colors used to paint and trim the motel; tall plastic palm trees rising in the ocean breeze; and even the plaques displaying the room number on the doors matched the theme of the motel. Each of these details worked to support the evocative theme, which enabled the visitor to go to places they would not normally have been able to afford. Through the 1960s, the number of visitors to the island continued to grow. In 1960 it was estimated that The Wildwoods entertained as many as 2-million people a year. The number of visitors for the July 4th weekend in 1966 alone numbered 400,000. Even though new motels were continually being built, virtually every motel and hotel in The Wildwoods had its "No Vacancy" sign switched on daily.

Starting in the mid-1960s, taller motel structures, generally three to four stories, began to appear, primarily along the newly opened beaches of Wildwood Crest. Although these motels were taller, at a block long they still utilized the horizontality seen in the smaller motels. This horizontality was emphasized by the decorative railing at each balcony level and the expanse of large picture windows at each floor.

The late-1960s saw an increase in crime rates and "rowdy behavior" on the island. Robberies, assaults, fights, drunk and disorderly behavior, and even murder gave the resort a bad reputation. It was also haunted by competition from larger amusement parks, such as Disneyworld and Six Flags. The legalization of gambling in Atlantic City brought with it the construction of large showy casinos that attracted both the big-name entertainers and the crowds who flocked to see their shows. Additionally, media coverage of ocean pollution and water contamination caused many visitors to search for vacation spots that did not involve the Jersey Shore.

The gas crisis and accompanying economic downturn in the early 1970s further injured the resort and by 1990 the City of Wildwood had an unemployment rate of 19%, the highest on the South Jersey Shore. A per capita income of \$10,079 left 27% of the cities permanent residents living below the poverty level. As a summer resort, the island never developed an industrial base, and was dependent on a tourist economy that only lasted from May to September. This commercial inactivity led to "preservation by neglect" of the motels. Starting in the late 1990s, The Wildwoods saw a resurgence in popularity. Its collection of 1950s and 60s architecture was unlike that found anywhere else in America and began to attract academic and media attention from many different sources. Part of this new-found popularity was due to the creation of the Doo Wop Preservation League (DWPL), which was founded in 1997 as a not-for-profit organization whose mission was to "foster awareness, appreciation, and education of the popular culture and imagery of the 1950s and 1960s, and to promote the preservation of the largest collection of mid-century resort architecture found in the United States." (1)

Wildwoods Motels on the NJ and National Registry of Historic Places

1. Caribbean Motel
5600 Ocean Avenue, Wildwood Crest Borough
SR 6/23/2005; NR 8/24/2005; NR # 05000915



From across E Buttercup Rd. looking south-west

From across Surf Ave. looking south-east

2. Chateau Bleu Motel
911 Surf Avenue, North Wildwood City
SR 1/16/2004; NR 3/25/2004; NR # 04000221



From across Surf Ave. looking south-east

3. Singapore Motel
507-15 E. Orchid Road, Wildwood Crest Borough, contributing to Wildwood Shore Historic District (7/23/2003); Theme: Asian



From across E Orchid Rd. looking north-west



2024

4. Sea Bird Motel
215-217 East Hand Avenue, Wildwood, Identified Individually (1/1/2001); Theme: Sea



From across E. Hand Ave looking north-east



2024

5. Fleur-De-Lis Motel
6105 Ocean Avenue, Wildwood Crest Borough, contributing to Wildwood Shore Historic District (7/23/2003); Theme: French Crown

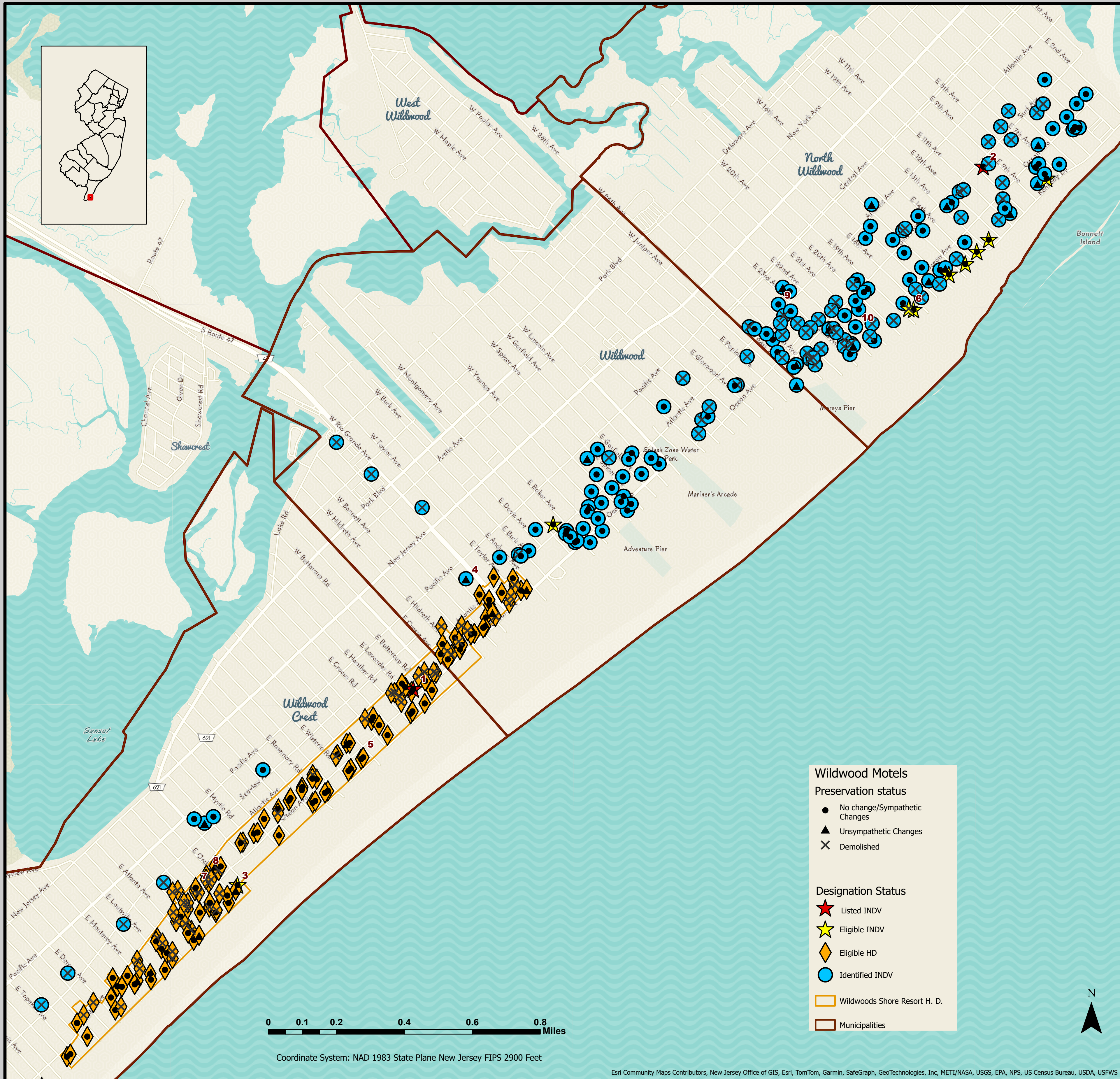


From Sweet Brank Beach looking north-west

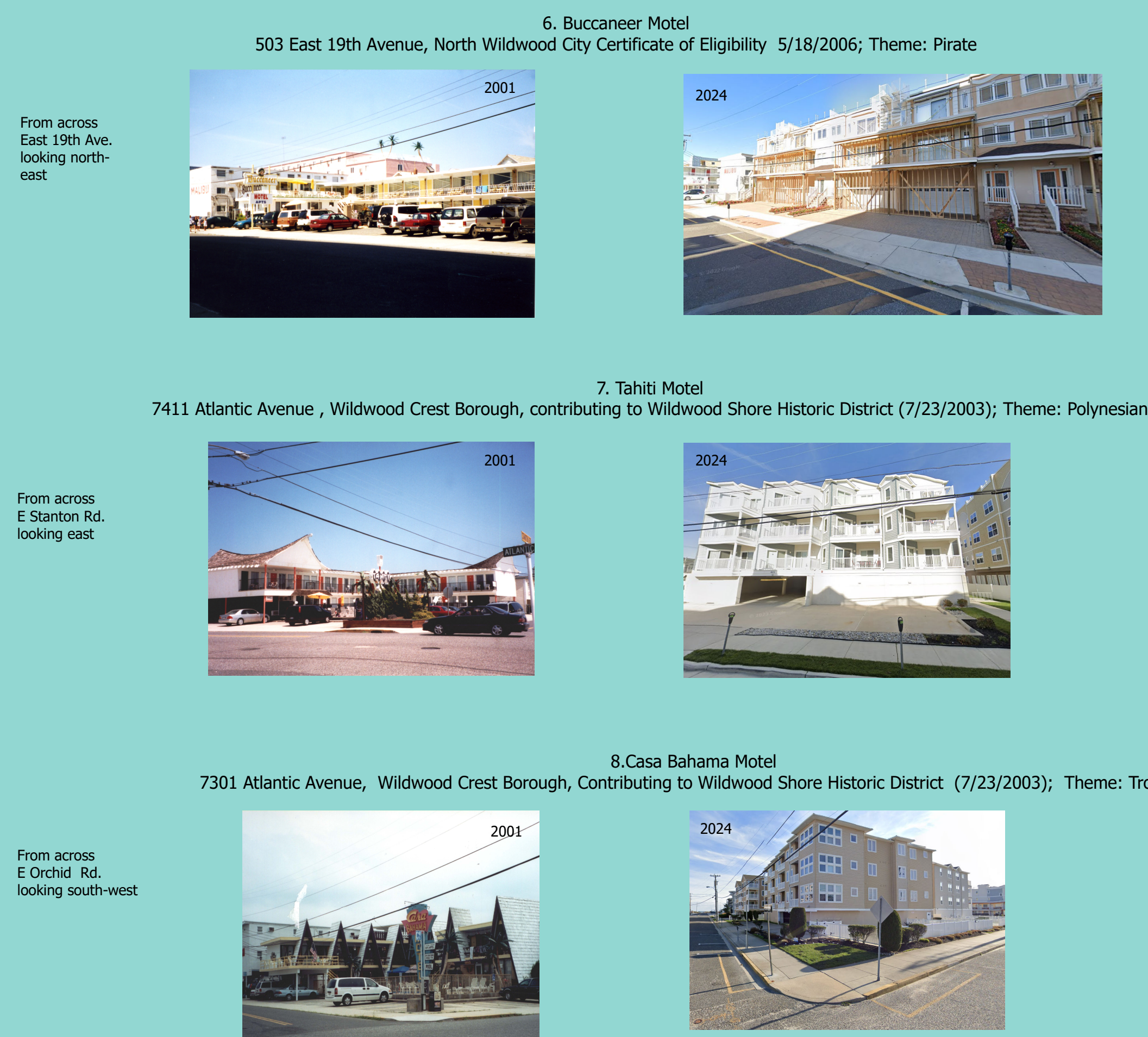


2024

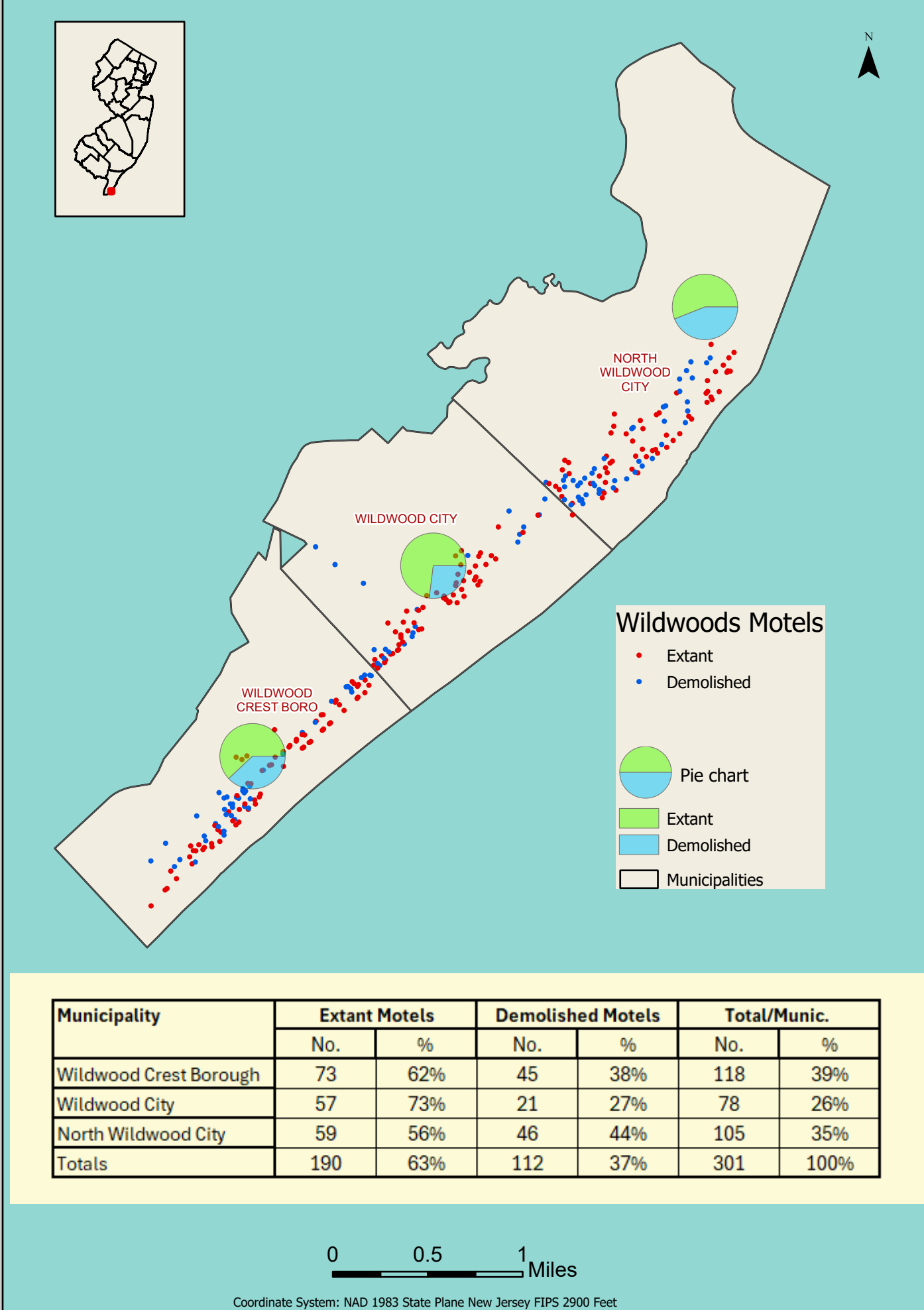
Motels of the Wildwoods Tidal Waves of Change over 20+ Years



Demolished Motels



Demolished Motels by Municipality in 2024



Motels of Wildwood MPDF

State Register date: 1/16/2004
National Register date: 3/25/2004

A Multiple Property Documentation Form is the core of a Multiple Property Submission, the format currently used to register groups of properties that are related by historical association or theme but are not contiguous and need not be nominated at the same time. A Multiple Property Documentation Form contains the historic contexts, and the background historical, geographical, and architectural information about the group of properties being nominated and is accompanied by one or more Registration Forms that describe specific properties. Together, the MPDF and its associated Registration Forms comprise a Multiple Property Submission.

Through grant funding, the Doo-Wop Preservation League retained Arch 2 Inc. to complete a preliminary survey of the surviving motels in 2001 and develop the context and criteria for the MPDF nomination, which was completed in 2004.

Statement of Historic Contexts

The postwar motels of "The Wildwoods," New Jersey (Wildwood, North Wildwood, and Wildwood Crest) are significant under criterion "A," which covers "resources" that are associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the "broad patterns of our history," and "C," which covers those that embody the distinctive "characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction." The group of well-preserved postwar (ca. 1950-1970) motels in The Wildwoods represents an important period in the development of tourism. Further, they constitute an exceptionally intact collection of examples of the resort motel type as it was developed in popular and trade publications of the period. The group satisfies "G" of the criteria considerations by having achieved "significance within the past 50 years if it is of exceptional importance."

Registration Criteria:

To be considered as eligible motel must meet all the following criteria:

- The motel must have been built within the period of significance dating from the end of World War II to the mid-1970s.
- The building must have been constructed as a motel.
- The balcony must be continuous and run along the exterior of the motel.
- Building footprints must be constructed in a line, "L"-shape, "U"-shape, or a variation of these forms.

In addition to the above requirements, a motel must meet five of the following eight requirements to be considered as eligible for the multiple property nomination:

- The building must have been constructed with a flat roof. The exception to this requirement is motels where a peaked roof is part of the motel's decorative theme.
- Balconies must be visually unsupported or supported by beams.
- Because the automobile was such an integral part of the resort motel experience, the motel must have on-site parking.
- The motel must have a carport, which may be the underside of a sundeck.
- The motel must have a distinctive illuminated sign. Neon signage can contribute to integrated integrity.
- The motel must have an extended roof overhanging at least equal to the width of the balcony.
- Motel construction must be concrete block with concrete plank flooring and balconies.
- The motel must have a distinctive theme, which is carried out through signage and decoration. (3)

Definition of "Motel"

A motel is a type of hotel. The word "motel" is a combination of two words, "motor" and "hotel." You can find a motel generally on highways, outskirts, and national road networks. It is meant for family or business travelers who go on a trip by car. A motel has a small reception, and it provides comfortable bedrooms for travelers for a charge.

Simply put, it is meant to fulfill the needs of people who want to stay one or two nights while on a trip, alone or with their loved ones. It provides reasonable lodging facilities to highway travelers.

Motels have ample space for parking vehicles. It usually has one or two floors, and the rooms can be accessed from the parking. To be precise, the motel rooms are generally facing the parking zone to make the entry and exit of people easy.

Motels offer facilities like car parking, a garage for car servicing, accommodation, food and beverage, a service station, and vehicle refueling. Some motels have restaurants, dining rooms and even a swimming pool. (2)

Wildwood Shore Resort Historic District

SHPO Opinion: 7/23/2003

Eligible to be listed in the New Jersey and National Registers of Historic Places under Criteria A and C, and Criteria Consideration G.

The Wildwood Shore Resort Historic District represents a collection of well-preserved post war motels significant in the development of tourism in the Wildwoods. The period of significance for the historic district is c.1945-1977. The Historic District is characterized by motels two to four stories in height with L or U-shaped footprints including amenities such as outdoor pools, sundecks, restaurants, lounges, office area, modest rooms, a tropical or seaborne theme, and neon signs on the roof or blade signs on street sides. (4)

Neon/Illuminated Signages

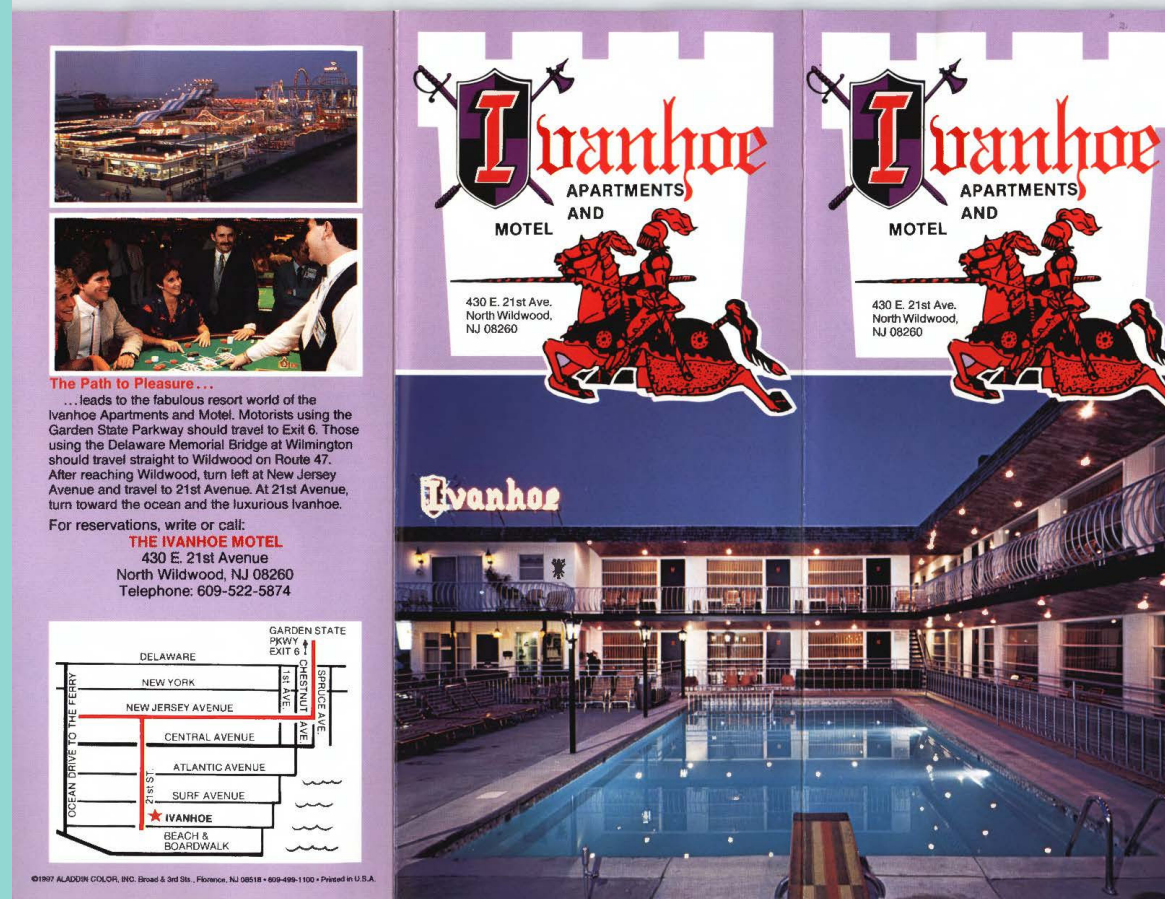


Advertisements

9. Cardinal Motel (extant) consists of two separate flat-roofed, L-shaped motels. Identified Individually (1/1/2001), Theme: Wildlife



10. Ivanhoe Motel (extant) is a flat-roofed, two-story, L-shaped motel. Identified Individually (1/1/2001), Theme: Medieval



References

(1) Article: Preservation Stagnation on the Jersey Shore
<https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/preservation-stagnation-on-the-jersey-shore.htm>

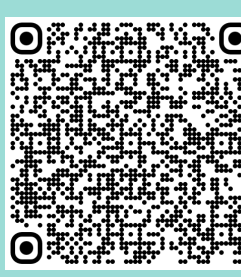
(2) <https://keydifferences.com/difference-between-hotel-and-motel.html>

(3) Motels of Wildwood MPDF:
<https://npgallery.nps.gov/nrhp>

(4) Known Historic Properties list:
https://www.nj.gov/dep/hpo/1identify/nrsr_lists.htm

(5) Motels of the Wildwoods MPDF Survey, North Wildwood, Wildwood, and Wildwood Crest, Cape May County, New Jersey, Arch 2, Inc., 2001, Volumes 1-3. (HPO Shelf Code: CAP GB 317).

The HPO reports library can be accessed through DEP DataMiner: <https://njems.nj.gov/DataMiner>



LUCY: HPO's online viewer for NJ's cultural resources inventory



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