

20th CENTURY COMMERCIAL ARCHITECTURE:
THE DINERS OF MASSACHUSETTS

F. ASSOCIATED PROPERTY TYPES

I. Description

A.

First Property Type: Lunch Wagon/Lunch Cart – Physical and Associative Characteristics

Physical Characteristics The lunch wagon (or lunch cart) is an enclosed prefabricated wagon on wheels, intended to be horse-drawn. The cart has a wood frame, a barrel roof, either transom windows at the ends of the cart or a monitor roof with a clerestory for ventilation, and painted wood paneling or galvanized steel panels for exterior sheathing. Any example will be set upon a foundation that is later than the cart. The length of the lunch wagon or cart is generally two to three times the width, with a length of between about sixteen to twenty-six feet on average. Generally examples will incorporate a sliding door or pocket door at the center of the façade; secondary entrances, if any, on the end walls; operable windows of stained, frosted, flash, or etched glass; varnished natural wood on the interior; a kitchen or food preparation area separated from the dining area by a counter; and a dining area with standing room or seating on stools at the counter and/or an eating shelf, if present. The “ten-stooler,” consisting of ten stools at the counter, is typical. Signage is on the exterior panels of the cart. Of all the diner property types, the lunch wagon or cart is the most rare in Massachusetts today and the most likely to have been altered.

Associative Characteristics Lunch wagons were the precursor to the modern diner in Massachusetts and were the sole form of diner in the state from the 1880s to the early 1920s. Mounted on wheels, lunch wagons were horse-drawn in the streets at night and removed from the streets by morning. Their operators catered to the so-called “night-lunch” or “night-owl” trade, which served factory workers and others who needed a quick meal in the late night or early morning hours. Lunch wagons typically operated in urban areas--particularly manufacturing and retail districts--and in town centers. The lunch wagon or cart evolved from a horse-drawn wagon operated during late evening and early morning hours to a stationary portable lunch car located off the road and open around the clock. Beginning ca. 1905 wheels started to be used only to haul the lunch cart to its destination.

Samuel Messer Jones (1854-1926) introduced the lunch wagon idea to Worcester in 1884 and Springfield in 1889. Jones, Thomas H. Buckley, and Charles H. Palmer were the principal builders of the early lunch wagons or carts in Massachusetts. From the 1910s through the early 1920s the Worcester Lunch Car Company led the state in large-scale production of the new stationary portable lunch cars. Horse-drawn lunch wagons and stationary portable lunch cars are particularly significant for their associations with the early decades of the diner industry, not just in Massachusetts but nationally.

(continued)

B.

Second Property Type: Barrel Roof Diner – Physical and Associative Characteristics

Physical Characteristics The barrel roof diner is the traditional diner form in Massachusetts. Factory-built and hauled to its site, these diners generally have a boxy

appearance, a symmetrical façade, and entries generally on the short (end) walls, though a center entry on the long elevation is sometimes seen. Typical features include a wood or steel frame, exterior panels of either painted steel or porcelain enamel, a brick or concrete foundation, and a continuous band of double-hung windows with transoms on the facade. The major distinguishing feature of this property type is the barrel roof, either with open eaves at the end walls or, less commonly, a closed barrel (rounded hipped) roof. On early examples the barrel roof extends over the entries on the two short walls; later examples tend not to continue the roofline over the entries but instead have flat projecting canopies at the ends. The interior typically features booths in the dining area, though also seen are the older layouts more commonly associated with lunch carts: a ten-stooler arrangement at the counter, an eating shelf along the inside façade wall, or even a dining area at one short end of the car with the kitchen at the other. More interior features and finishes include tile walls and floor; counters of white marble, white opalite, or Formica; white counter stools of white porcelain enamel; built-in refrigerators and other fixtures; and more equipment in the backbar area. Signage is painted on the exterior apron panels below the windows on the long elevation, or mounted above the windows. Examples of this property type are most susceptible to alterations in cladding and roof materials.

Associative Characteristics The barrel roof diner dominated the diner landscape in Massachusetts from about the mid-1920s to ca. 1950. Most closely associated with the dawning of the roadside diner era, during which an automobile was necessary to reach many diners, examples of this property type were installed on state and federal roadways and near important crossroads, in addition to the more established downtown business district and manufacturing district locations. The barrel roof diner also may be considered the first true “diner,” as the term is popularly known, in Massachusetts. Diner historian Richard J. S. Gutman identifies ca. 1923-1924 as the point at which the night lunch wagon or cart began to become known as the dining car or diner. An allusion to the fine dining then offered in dining cars on the railroads, the diner name also reflected a change in fare from night-only meals to meals served around the clock. The introduction of booths in the dining area, which also occurred in the mid-1920s, was intended to encourage female customers, who presumably would not sit at the counter on stools. As the earliest and most pervasive form of diner in Massachusetts for a generation, the barrel roof diner reflects changes to the image and desired clientele of the diner over time. Worcester Lunch Car Company manufactured almost all examples of this property type in Massachusetts, though a handful of diners were produced by other manufacturers, particularly Jerry O’Mahony Inc. of Elizabeth, New Jersey.

(continued)

C.

Third Property Type: Rail Car Diner – Physical and Associative Characteristics

Physical Characteristics This property type includes factory-built diners bearing a resemblance to railroad cars or streetcars or, rarely, a former railroad car or streetcar converted to a diner. Hauled to

its site, the rail car diner has a wood or steel frame, a foundation of brick or concrete, and exterior panels of either painted galvanized steel or porcelain enamel. On most examples, the rail car inspiration is evident in the closed barrel (rounded hipped) roof with full-length clerestory windows, and the long façade -- typically 10 to 14 bays -- with integral entries in the short end walls. Variations that are much less common include a barrel roof with open ends and clerestory, or a center entry on the long wall rather than entries on the short end walls. There are no

distinguishing interior features specific to the rail car diner other than the effect of having two end-wall entries, when present. Examples of this property type are most susceptible to alterations in cladding and roof materials, and particularly the covering of the clerestory windows, as well as the construction of incompatible additions.

Associative Characteristics Both inspired by and an outgrowth of railroad car and streetcar design, the rail car diner is a discrete phenomenon in the diner industry. Known examples of this property type in Massachusetts were constructed in the late 1920s and early 1930s, the product of the decline and subsequent abandonment of streetcar lines in the Commonwealth, the influence of “fine dining” cars on railroad lines, and the suitability of the rail car form for diner use. Original rail cars converted to diners are rare survivals in Massachusetts. More common is the factory-built diner showing the rail car influence in its design. Production of rail car diners was a logical extension of the business of streetcar and railroad dining car manufacturers. In Massachusetts, J. G. Brill Company of Philadelphia began building monitor-roof diners in 1927 at its subsidiary plant, Wason Manufacturing Company of Springfield, a builder of railway and electric streetcars. Worcester Lunch Car Company also manufactured diners of this type. Like examples of the barrel roof diner, examples of this property type were installed on major roadways and near important crossroads, in addition to the more established downtown business district and manufacturing district locations.

D.

Fourth Property Type: Streamliner – Physical and Associative Characteristics

Physical Characteristics A factory-built diner hauled to its site, the streamliner has a distinctive form, with a closed barrel (rounded hipped) roof and either one or both short end walls having a curved, “shovel-nosed” profile. The streamliner form has been likened to the form of a bullet. Known examples of the property type in Massachusetts are wood or steel frame and clad with porcelain enamel panels. Ornamental detailing in a contrasting color, if any, typically runs horizontally on the building and accentuates the appearance of mobility conveyed by the streamlined form. Another element contributing to the streamlined appearance of the diner is a rooftop fin for ornamental and often signage purposes; on examples without the fin, roof-mounted signage is usually present. The entry is most often located on a
(continued)

long wall, and fenestration can include bands of thin rectangular windows in the curved ends. Though interior finishes generally are typical of other diners of the 1930s and early 1940s, the interior space is distinctive, with freestanding tables and chairs or curved booth seating occupying the curved “nose-end” of the diner. As a property type, a streamliner in its architectural features is distinct from other, generally later, diner forms that reflect the influence of streamlining and machine aesthetics but demonstrate less obvious associations with mobility in their design. A modified version of the streamliner is the “semi-streamliner,” with either a barrel or monitor roof and featuring slightly canted end walls. Streamliners and semi-streamliners are rare in Massachusetts today.

Associative Characteristics Perhaps more than any other diner property type, the streamliner in its design evokes the diner’s early history as a mobile building. Constructed from 1939 to 1942, the streamliner reflects the influence of industrial design of the 1920s and 1930s. The form mimicked the look of streamlined locomotives and automobiles. J. B. Judkins Company of Merrimac and the Worcester Lunch Car Company constructed all known examples in Massachusetts. A former builder of custom automobile bodies, J. B. Judkins Company entered the diner-building industry after the Depression and produced the Sterling Streamliner. Later in the 1930s, Worcester Lunch Car Company introduced two streamlined models: the model with curved nose at the short ends (also known as the double-ended bullet or “circular diner”) and a

more popular model with canted ends (known as the “semi-streamliner”). While streamlining was introduced to diner design through the distinctive shape of diners of this property type, the influence of streamlining persisted in diner design for over twenty-five years. The typical location of the streamliner reflected a shift from downtown business district and manufacturing areas to roadside sites with parking lots, especially on heavily traveled highway routes. The streamliner’s relationship with the road and the automobile is a key factor in its eligibility.

E.

Fifth Property Type: Stainless Steel Diner – Physical and Associative Characteristics

Physical Characteristics The stainless steel diner was the quintessential modern diner in Massachusetts after World War II. Factory-built and hauled to its site, the stainless steel diner was also the first type of diner present in Massachusetts that could be constructed and hauled in sections. An example of this property type typically has a steel frame, flat or low-pitched roof, high foundation of concrete or brick, and rectangular massing with a projecting entry vestibule centered on the façade. Monitor roofs are uncommon but may be seen in early (1940s) examples of this type. The major character-defining feature is the stainless steel exterior, generally with porcelain enamel metal accents that run horizontally, though sometimes vertically, above and below the windows. Many examples of this property type also display rounded corners, large windows of fixed plate glass, steel fin-like dividers between windows, a pair of steel and glass entries in the projecting vestibule, a clock centered at the top of the vestibule, and steel ornament in quilted, sawtooth, or other patterns. Signage is most commonly located on the roof, and consists of either individual channel letters in neon or one roof-mounted sign. On the interior, the stainless steel diner displays a cove ceiling, steel on the walls and back bar, tile or
(continued)

terrazzo floors, and a Formica counter. Counter stools are steel, and booths are steel or wood generally covered in vinyl. The entry vestibule, exterior and interior, is the most common location of alterations on the stainless steel diner, usually with replacement finishes, handrails at the stairs, or entries. Rear kitchen wings, usually wood-frame or concrete block, are common on examples of this property type; some appear to be original.

Associative Characteristics Presenting an image of efficiency, cleanliness, and machine-inspired modernity, the stainless steel diner was the most popular diner form in Massachusetts from ca. 1945 to ca. 1960. Mountain View Diners, Jerry O’Mahony Inc., DeRaffele Diners, Silk City Diners, and Fodero Dining Car Company, all diner manufacturers based in New Jersey or New York, produced almost all examples of the property type in Massachusetts. As the modern alternative to the traditional barrel-roofed diner in Massachusetts, the stainless steel diners were immensely popular and posed a challenge to Worcester Lunch Car Company, whose traditional porcelain enamel-clad, barrel-roofed diners with wood-trimmed interiors failed to compete successfully with the newer stainless steel designs. The Worcester company did come out with its own model of stainless steel diner in 1952 but by that time could not recapture its share of the diner-building market. Advances in diner design and construction enabled diner manufacturers to offer sectional, or split, diners, which could be transported in pieces and assembled on site. The typical location of stainless steel diners, like that of the earlier streamliner form, reflected a shift from downtown business district and manufacturing areas to roadside sites with parking lots, especially on heavily traveled highway routes. The stainless steel diner’s relationship with the road and the automobile is a key factor in its eligibility.

II.

Significance

Examples of all five property types—lunch cart/lunch wagon, barrel roof diner, rail car

diner, streamliner, and stainless steel diner—are an important physical manifestation of the diner industry in Massachusetts from the late 19th century to ca. 1970 as described in the historic context above. An example of any of the five property types will meet the National Register criteria and criteria considerations, at the state and local levels, as discussed in this section.

A.
National Register Criteria

Criterion A All examples will meet this criterion for associations with the development of the diner industry in the Commonwealth and with the development of the community or region in which they are located. Refer to Section E, Statement of Historic Context for more detailed information.

Criterion B Some examples may meet this criterion for integral associations with the productive lives and work of noted people in the diner industry. Refer to Section E, Statement of Historic Context for more detailed information.

(continued)

Criterion C All examples will meet criterion as examples of diner form and style in the Commonwealth. Some will be examples of the work of master designers (in this case, diner manufacturers) and/or will possess high artistic value. Refer to Section E, Statement of Historic Context for more detailed information.

Criterion D A few examples may meet criterion due to their potential to yield important information about the evolution of the diner industry or diner building either through the study of extant diners or through historic archaeological remains. Refer to Section E, Statement of Historic Context for more detailed information.

B.
National Register Criteria Considerations

With the occasional exception of Criteria Considerations B and G, the criteria considerations do not apply to the five property types as a whole.

Criteria Consideration B Removal from one location and placement in another is inherent in the portable nature of diners of all property types. Most diners have an orientation, setting, and general roadside environment that are comparable to those of their historic location and compatible with their significance. An example of any of the five property types need not meet Criteria Consideration B unless it has been relocated to a site that is incompatible with the diner's original function. Examples of all five property types are significant primarily for architectural value in a state and local context. Their historic association with the community in which they are placed, while important, is a secondary factor in their significance.

Criteria Consideration G Both scholarly research and the evaluation of the history of diners over the last ten to fifteen years has provided the necessary historical perspective to determine that a diner is exceptionally important. In addition, with very few exceptions, cities and towns in Massachusetts have a single diner, if any at all. From the perspective of a community's architectural history, the diner form is sufficiently unique to be considered of exceptional significance, provided the diner was located in Massachusetts during the period of significance.

C.

Level of Evaluation

Diners of all five property types are judged in a state as well as local context.

III. Registration Requirements

An example from any of the five property types must possess the physical and associative characteristics discussed above and in Section E to be considered eligible for National Register listing.

(continued)

The primary associated characteristic, and the key registration requirement, is integral connections with the development of the diner industry in the Commonwealth, namely the operation of diners in Massachusetts during the period from the late 19th century to ca. 1970. To be eligible for nomination to the National Register, an example from any of the five property types must have been operated in connection with the diner industry in Massachusetts and maintain sufficient physical integrity to convey that association. The factory-built diner need not have been manufactured in Massachusetts to be eligible but should have been located in Massachusetts during the period of significance.

An example from any of the five property types also must retain integrity to the period of significance. The physical condition and integrity of a diner is affected by changes in ownership and management, which potentially can compromise these buildings over time. Retrofitting of interior spaces and equipment, and construction of kitchen, service, or storage additions to meet business demands is a common occurrence. Abandonment of these buildings or conversion to non-restaurant uses also may compromise integrity.

Location and Setting An example of any of the five property types would not be expected to retain integrity of location but always will possess integrity of setting. Given the portable nature of most diners, a diner need not be in its historic location to be eligible, although a majority of the diners identified to date in Massachusetts are believed to be on their original sites. Lunch wagons/lunch carts in particular may not retain integrity of location, as they were mobile buildings placed onto permanent foundations when it was no longer feasible or desirable to continue the original horse-drawn operation. Extant examples of the lunch wagon/lunch cart property type, however, are extremely rare in Massachusetts. With regard to setting, to be eligible a diner must be located in a historically appropriate setting, with clear orientation to the street a critical factor, and such setting must be compatible with the diner's historic function.

Factors that affect this type of integrity include changes in ownership and management, and removal of the diner to a storage or museum location. These factors may be sufficiently detrimental to integrity to preclude registration.

Design, Materials, and Workmanship An example of any of the five property types will always possess a high degree of integrity of design, materials, and workmanship. These are important integrity factors for each of the five property types. Refer to Section E, Statement of Historic Context, for more detailed information.

Factors that typically affect this type of integrity include modification of the original roof line or eave line, or addition of historically inappropriate exterior cladding such as synthetic siding or roof shingles. In examples of the rail car type, irreversible alteration to or elimination of the rooftop clerestory windows, a key character-defining feature, would compromise integrity. In examples of the

(continued)

streamliner type, alteration of the profile of the curved end(s) would compromise integrity. Collectively these factors may be sufficiently detrimental to integrity to preclude registration of the diner. Alteration or removal of historic signage generally will not be considered sufficiently detrimental to compromise the diner's integrity as a whole, nor will replacement of historic materials on the interior if the interior as a whole maintains integrity to a large degree. Construction of wood-clad or concrete block additions for kitchens and storage is consistent with the historic use of the diner over time and will not be considered to compromise the diner's architectural integrity if such additions are located on the rear of the main diner block and are clearly secondary to the main block in scale and massing.

Feeling and Association An example from any of the five property types must possess historic associations with the diner industry in Massachusetts. This is a key integrity factor. Examples must retain sufficient physical integrity as described above to be able to convey their relationships to and associations with the historic context described in Section E.