NPS Form 10-900
(Rev. 10-90)

OMB No. 1024-0018

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

1231

DEC 04 2009

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES REGISTRATION FORM

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Central Diner

other names/site number Elmwood Diner, Jenn's Elmwood Diner, Ole Elmwood Diner, Liberty Elm Diner, ETC

2. Location

street & number 777 Elmwood Ave ☐ not for publication

city or town Providence ☐ vicinity

state RI code ____ county Providence code 07 zip code 02907

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this ☒ nomination ☐ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ☒ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant ☐ nationally ☐ statewide ☒ locally. (☐ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Edward Sanderson 11/24/2009
Signature of certifying official/Title Date

RI Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property ☐ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. (☐See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

☒ entered in the National Register
☐ See continuation sheet
☐ determined eligible for the National Register
☐ See continuation sheet.
☐ determined not eligible for the National Register
☐ See continuation sheet.
☐ removed from the National Register.
☐ See continuation sheet.
☐ other (explain)

Signature of the Keeper Date of Action

Edson H. Beall 1.14.10

Central Diner
Name of Property

Providence, RI
County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(Check as many boxes as apply.)

- ☒ private
- ☐ public-local
- ☐ public-State
- ☐ public-Federal

Category of Property
(Check only one box.)

- ☒ buildings
- ☐ district
- ☐ site
- ☐ structure
- ☐ object

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not include any previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1		buildings
		sites
		structures
		objects
		total

Name of related multiple property listings
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
(Enter categories from instructions.)

COMMERCE/TRADE/restaurant

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions.)

COMMERCE/TRADE/restaurant

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions.)

OTHER

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions.)

foundation BRICK
walls METAL/steel
roof METAL
other OTHER/porcelain enamel

Narrative Description
(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria
(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- ☒ **A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- ☐ **B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- ☒ **C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- ☐ **D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations
(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- ☐ **A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- ☒ **B** removed from its original location.
- ☐ **C** a birthplace or grave.
- ☐ **D** a cemetery.
- ☐ **E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- ☐ **F** a commemorative property.
- ☐ **G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years

Areas of Significance
(Enter categories from instructions.)

COMMERCE
ARCHITECTURE

Period of Significance

1947-1954

Significant Dates

1947
1953-54

Significant Person

Cultural Affiliation

Architect/Builder

Worcester Lunch Car Company

Narrative Statement of Significance
(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography
Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- ☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 36) has been requested
- ☐ previously listed in the National Register
- ☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
- ☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #

Primary location of additional data:

- ☒ State Historic Preservation Office
- ☐ Other State Agency
- ☐ Federal agency
- ☐ Local government
- ☐ University
- ☐ Other

Name of repository

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property .23 acre

UTM References
(Place additional references on a continuation sheet.)

	Zone	Easting	Northing
1	19	298700	4629390
2			
3			
4			

☐ See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description
(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification
(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Sarah Zurier/RIHPHC, Kim A. Smith, Denise Bass/photographer

organization RI Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission date November 16, 2009

street & number 150 Benefit St. telephone 401-222-2968

city or town Providence state RI zip code 02903

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

Additional items
(check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO.)

name Solid Rock Properties LLC

street & number 777 Elmwood Ave. telephone 401-467-0777

city or town Providence state RI zip code 02907

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and amend listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 *et seq.*).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 2050

Description

Central Diner—Worcester Lunch Car Company Diner #806—is an excellent example of the classic barrel-roofed diner that was widely produced by the company throughout the twentieth century. It is a one-story, steel-framed prefabricated structure, measuring ten feet six inches in width by forty feet in length with three-foot projecting roof overhangs on each end. The present front vestibule and concrete block kitchen and dining room extension at the rear are later additions.

A flat-roofed, projecting stainless steel-clad entry vestibule projects from the front (east) elevation. Its form and massing are compatible with the diner's historic façade. Lining the front wall on each side of the entrance are red porcelain enamel panels set beneath one-over-one aluminum windows. The panels are secured by red porcelain enamel battens. The windows have an operable lower sash which raises a screen that is recessed within the front wall, and windows are separated by a pale yellow vertical porcelain panel. A black porcelain enamel window sill, underscored by a bright yellow horizontal batten, delineates the upper and lower halves of the diner.

At both ends of the façade, red porcelain enamel pilaster panels extend the full height of the wall, wrapping around to the south and north elevations. On both lower end panels of the façade, the words "Booth Service" are painted in yellow. A painted horizontal yellow stripe is located three inches below the window sills. Additional yellow pin-striping is painted at the bottom of the lower end panels of the façade, below the "Booth Service" inscriptions. The barrel shaped roofline curves down to meet a simple wood header above the windows. The diner frame and vestibule sit atop a two-foot high brick foundation.

Both side elevations are distinguished by the overhanging barrel roof. The north (right side) elevation has a three-bay arrangement with a central stainless steel door flanked by red porcelain enamel panels with yellow pin-striping set below window openings. The windows and the door light are now infilled with plywood. A short, straight-run, concrete staircase with a modern iron handrail provides access to this entrance. A tripartite group of arched stainless steel transom windows is set over the end door. The larger window in the center has a stainless two-light sash with an operable lower awning for ventilation. It is flanked by single-light sidelights whose upper edges curve to follow the roofline. The fascia board is wood, and the eave of the roof overhang is porcelain enamel. The south (left side) elevation is partially obscured by a concrete block kitchen addition, which preserves the original diner's curved roofline and transom elements inside. The south elevation continues the primary façade details, with two windows, and red porcelain enamel panels and battens filling in the area beneath. A transom arrangement similar to the one on the north end existed on the south elevation, now interrupted by the kitchen addition, leaving only one sidelight visible from the exterior. On the interior, the rest of the transom is still visible, with a cutout ventilation panel in the larger center window and a second sidelight, both now opening to the kitchen addition.

The exterior of the Central Diner is in fair condition. The porcelain panels had at some point been covered over with two different types of modern siding, leaving nail holes in the panels. Some of the battens that hold the panels to the structure are missing or deteriorated. The metal roof is copper sheathed and its surface has been coated with a white soy-based sealer.

The diner was expanded with two flat-roof, concrete block additions. A kitchen addition was added ca 1953-54 to the rear southwest corner of the diner, and a dining room addition was attached to the rear northwest corner ca 1987. The two additions meet and appear seamless on the rear (west) elevation. Period industrial-type metal windows punctuate the walls of the kitchen addition, and glass-block windows light the dining room. The rough dimensions of the combined additions are twenty feet by forty feet.

Inside, the diner has remained largely intact since the day it rolled out of the Worcester Lunch Car Company factory, and is in good condition. A long counter configured for seating fourteen patrons on stools is located on the left side of the interior, and there is space at the right end of the diner for additional booth seating. Interior colors follow a pastel yellow and blue scheme, with stainless steel and black accents. Many original materials remain in the interior. The floor features tile laid out in a repeating pattern of three-inch squares comprising two-inch rectangles arranged pinwheel fashion around small square centers, all in alternating yellow and blue colors. The interior wainscot and the counter apron feature square yellow and black ceramic tiles, accented with stainless steel strips. The counter retains its original marble top, and is fronted by chrome pedestal stools with blue horizontal stripes both on the shaft and on the edge of the circular seats. Behind the counter, a stainless steel door provides access to the kitchen addition from the south end of the original diner space. The back bar of the diner is clad in stainless panels, each in a sunburst pattern, held by stainless vertical battens. A yellow porcelain enamel grill hood has two menu boards and a clock in its center. A plain stainless steel band lines the top of the windows and on the end walls between the curved roofline and the windows. The ceiling panels are light-blue porcelain enamel panels, affixed with stainless steel battens.

The existing lighting is not original to the structure. Replacement lighting consists of pendant fixtures evenly spaced lengthwise across the apex of the ceiling's center panel, with glass globes in a graduated-drum and hemisphere design, compatible with the original fittings, and modern industrial-type sconces with cylindrical glass globes inside metal cages, mounted to the porcelain panels between the windows on the front wall of the diner. Above the windows on the front wall of the diner are original affixed metal hat racks.

The Central Diner originally had a sliding front door that, when in the open position, retracted into a pocket projecting from the front wall. The door has been changed to a hinged wood and glass replacement, but the ceramic tiled pocket remains to the south of the original door opening.

Three and one-half of the original oak booths also remain and are used on the front wall at the right end of the diner. The north end of the diner was originally configured to provide seating for four booths with a center aisle. A six-foot section of the northwest wall of the diner has been removed to allow access to the rear dining room addition.

The Central Diner is located in the South Elmwood neighborhood of Providence, about a quarter-mile north of Roger Williams Park and Interstate 95 on and off ramps. The diner faces east towards busy Elmwood Avenue, with its long side facing the street, and is set back about forty feet from the sidewalk. The western (rear) edge of the property line abuts a sparsely wooded parcel which backs up to Amtrak's Northeast Corridor railroad line. To the north and south stand vernacular triple-decker residences. And to the east, across Elmwood Avenue, the diner faces the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority (RIPTA) bus garage and the former Elmwood Theatre that now houses the First Church of God.

Photographs

Date: November 19, 2008
Photographer: Denise J.R. Bass
Central Diner
Providence, Rhode Island

Photographs 1-7

1. Central Diner, view of east and north elevations
2. Central Diner, view of south and east elevations
3. Central Diner, view of north end door
4. Central Diner, wide view, looking south
5. Central Diner, counter and back bar, looking north
6. Central Diner, dining booths and north door
7. Central Diner, counter and stools, look

Statement of significance

Central Diner—Worcester Lunch Car Company diner #806 is significant as a rare and well-preserved example of a distinctive twentieth-century American building type. Diners were once a fixture of Providence's business centers, industrial districts, and roadsides, serving shift workers, after-hours revelers, business people, and drivers at all hours of the day and night. Central Diner is a well-preserved product of the Worcester Lunch Car Company of Massachusetts, one of the pioneers of the American diner industry. In addition to its architectural importance, Central Diner embodies the evolution of the Providence diner business after World War II.

Diner Origins: From Providence to Worcester

The American diner originated in Downtown Providence with a teenage entrepreneur named Walter Scott (1841-1924). In the mid-1850s, he walked the city's business and manufacturing districts and sold candy, fruit, and newspapers from a basket. In 1857, Scott decided to focus his business on people working the late shift, as local restaurants typically closed at 8 p.m. His customers included newspaper workers, club-goers, and other late-night denizens of Downtown Providence. When his business outgrew his basket, Scott acquired a pushcart, which allowed him to sell hot coffee as well.[1]

In 1872, Scott entered into the "night lunch" or "late lunch" business full-time. He acquired a former freight wagon, fitted it with a canvas top, and parked it outside the *Providence Journal* office, then at 2 Weybosset Street. Like the late-night employees of the *Journal* and other Providence newspapers, Scott worked regular hours from dusk to 4 a.m.[2]

The succession of entrepreneurs who followed Scott's example provides a backdrop to the history and architecture of the Central Diner. In 1883, Ruel B. Jones quit the Providence Police Department to go into the night lunch business. He hired a local wagon builder, variously identified as Frank Dracont or Diacont, to fabricate the first specifically designed lunch cart, which accommodated customers who ate standing outside the wagon. Starting with his first lunch wagon at Hoyle Square, Jones had at least seven carts operating in Providence by 1887.[3]

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[1] Richard J.S. Gutman, *American Diner Then and Now* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 12-14. "The Lunch Cart—Aged 60," *Providence Journal* (February 21, 1932), 14-15.
[2] Ibid.
[3] "Poirier's Diner" (Providence, R.I.), National Register nomination (2003); "Lunch Cart," 15.

Samuel Messer Jones, a cousin of Ruel, moved to Worcester, Massachusetts in 1884 and went into the lunch cart business there. In 1887, Jones built the first mobile cart incorporating a full kitchen and space for customers to stand or sit and eat inside. With the success of the eat-in wagon, he opened additional wagons throughout Worcester. Four years later, Jones moved to Springfield, Massachusetts and pioneered the night lunch business in that city.[4]

Worcester builder Charles H. Palmer purchased most of the Jones carts. In 1891, he received the first patent ever for a lunch cart. His design set the standard for the next twenty-five years: "an enclosed body with small front wheels and a narrower tail end between high back wheels; a counter separating the rear kitchen from the dining area, which featured stools or chairs; and windows for passing food to more customers standing at the curb or waiting alongside in carriages."[5]

As lunch carts grew larger and more elaborate, they became more permanent—or at least less mobile—fixtures on city streets throughout the northeast. In 1905, Worcester's T.H. Buckley Lunch Wagon Manufacturing and Catering Company rolled out a new model affixed to low wheels. It could be transported from the factory to the car's destination and left in place, rather than hauled to its location every afternoon and hauled out every morning. With a permanent site, diner operators could install electric lights, gas stoves, and running water and serve customers around the clock. The same model also improved the interior plan by locating the kitchen inside a U-shaped serving counter and placing stools and a shallow "eating shelf" along the inside perimeter of the cart.[6]

Although other manufacturers of dining carts sprang up around Massachusetts and beyond, Worcester quickly emerged as the industry's capital. When Philip H. Duprey formed the Worcester Lunch Car and Carriage Manufacturing Company in 1906, he bought out one other rival firm and hired several former employees of Buckley. In his book about the company, Richard J.S. Gutman notes that "Worcester occasionally advertised itself as the successor to the T.H. Buckley Company."[7]

Under the direction of master designer Charles P. Gemme (a former Buckley carpenter), Worcester lunch cars developed new configurations, decorations, and finishes. One early plan increased the length of the car, put doors on the center and one end, and placed the kitchen behind a long counter with stools. One of Gemme's innovations was the monitor roof with small operable windows to improve light and ventilation.[8]

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[4] *American Diner*, 17-18.
[5] "The Diners of Massachusetts" National Register Multiple Property Listing (1999).
[6] *American Diner*, 22-31.
[7] Richard J.S. Gutman, *The Worcester Lunch Car Company* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2004), 19.
[8] Ibid.

Each dining car created by the Worcester Lunch Car and Carriage Manufacturing Company (later shortened to Worcester Lunch Car Company) was assigned a serial number starting with #200. Company records, like sketches and framing diagrams, were labeled with the appropriate serial number. And an individually numbered metal "tag" was affixed inside each dining car to identify it as a Worcester product.

By the 1920s, Worcester dining cars (often shorted to "diners") featured long counters of pink Tennessee marble, white-tile floors and walls, plate-metal kitchen equipment, and oak woodwork. Equipment included steam tables, grills, refrigerators, exhaust hoods—all integrated with storage and food preparation areas in the "backbar" behind the counter. In the 1930s, the streamline aesthetic, with its appearance of movement and efficiency, influenced American design from household objects to automobiles to fashion to architecture. Diners, which already embodied mobility, were updated with state-of-the-art materials like porcelain enamel, Formica, and stainless steel and with new forms like slanted or round end walls.[9]

Central Diner: From Worcester to Providence

The corner of West Exchange and Gaspee streets in Downtown Providence was prime real estate for a diner in the 1930s and 1940s. In the thick of the city's central business district, the location was steps away from the rail yards and just across Gaspee Street from busy Union Station. In the blocks to the south and west was the heart of the city: City Hall; the Biltmore and Dreyfus hotels; Fry's, Strand, and Emery theatres; factories; office buildings; shops; warehouses; residences; and garages. Just two blocks south stood the new headquarters of the Providence Journal and its hungry workers who had formerly patronized Walter Scott's business.

According to Providence city directories, there was a Central Diner on site at 25 (later renumbered 27) West Exchange Street at least as far back as 1932. Note that it was the same business but not the same building as the subject of this National Register nomination. Historic images from the Providence Journal photographic archives provide several glimpses of the first Central Diner in the 1930s. The structure was situated with its length flanking West Exchange Street. The barrel-roof diner had a narrow monitor and awning over twelve windows interrupted by a central front door. The words CENTRAL and DINER are painted on the wall beneath the windows. The manufacturer and construction date of this diner are not known.[10]

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[9] Ibid., 29, 89; *American Diner*, 61; Thomas C. Jester, "Porcelain Enamel" in *Twentieth-Century Building Materials: History and Conservation,* edited by Thomas C. Jester (New York: McGraw Hill, 1995), 254-61.
[10] Providence Journal Photographic Archives, 1933-39.

Nicholas Venditti operated the Central Diner on site from 1932 to 1936. Between 1937 and 1943 the operator was James Vona, and the street address changed from 25 to 27 in 1941. Vona ran the diner through 1946, when it passed to Ralph J. Narducci, listed in the city directory as president and treasurer of Central Diner Inc. in 1947. Born in Lincoln, Ralph "Truck" Narducci (1919-2000) was graduated from the University of Rhode Island and married Phyllis Diano.[11]

Soon after Narducci acquired the business from Vona, he purchased a new diner from the Worcester Lunch Car Company. By 1946, more than a dozen Worcester diners had been delivered to Rhode Island. Most are long gone—destroyed, relocated, or so altered as to be unrecognizable. About seven Worcester diners had arrived in Providence by 1946: Emery's Café (Worcester #267, 1916), the mobile Conlin's Lunch (#310, 1918), Mike's Diner (#390, 1922 or 1943), two diners of unknown name (#535, 1920s and #640, 1941-42), Lindberg's Diner (#607, 1920s) on Ellwood (probably Elmwood) Avenue, and Mancini's Service Diner (#791, 1946) at 389½ Charles Street.[12]

And there were at least seventeen outside Providence: one of unknown name (Worcester #471, ca 1920s) in Newport; the Ocean-View Diner (#622, 1929), McDermott's Warren Diner (#666, 1930), and Sweetheart Diner (#706, 1933) in Warren; Arctic Diner (#623, 1929) in West Warwick; Lindberg's Diner (#632, 1929) in East Greenwich; Goulet's Diner (#651, 1929), Champ's (#416, 1922), and Beau-May Diner (#667, 1930) in Woonsocket; Charlie's Diner (#658, 1930) and McDermott's (#700, 1932) in East Providence; Apponaug Diner (#662, 1930) in Warwick; Meunier's Diner (#661, 1930), Lovely's Diner (#664, 1930), Wightman Diner (#675, 1930), Ward's Diner (#693, 1932), and Brothers Diner (now the Right Spot, #782, 1944), all in Pawtucket; and Duffy's (#784, 1945) in Central Falls.[13]

In 1947, the Worcester Dining Car Company published a brochure titled "There's more money in Worcester Diners." The firm based its pitch on its legacy as "America's Pioneer Dining Car Builders." Potential buyers were reminded that it was the Worcester Lunch Car Company that built "the first *modern lunch car* in 1906" (italics original) and that has continued to refine design, materials, and equipment, leaving behind the old days when "you hitched Old Nell to your lunch car each evening and clopped downtown where the night owls roamed."[14]

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[11] Providence city directories, 1932-1947; Obituary for Ralph Narducci, *Providence Journal* (23 January 2000).
[12] Worcester Lunch Car Company, "Layout Sketches," ca 1920s-1957, collection of American Diner Museum. Because many Worcester diners were moved or destroyed, it is difficult to reach a firm count. Additional information will eventually yield new counts.
[13] Worcester Lunch Car Company, "Layout Sketches."
[14] Worcester Lunch Car Company, "There's more money in Worcester Diners," 1947. Collection of Richard J.S. Gutman.

This 1947 pamphlet contains photographs and descriptions of several typical models, starting at twenty feet in length and ranging from ten feet six inches to fifteen feet in width. There were several basic options for diner construction and finishes. Exteriors were fitted with porcelain enamel panels or a less expensive, "galvanealed" painted steel plate finish, with decoration and lettering done to order. Each Worcester diner was lined with Alfol aluminum leaf for insulation purposes. Roofs had a monitor or barrel profile and were covered with asphalt shingles or metal. Windows were made of the "duralumin" alloy and fitted with patented screens.

The interior of the Worcester diner was "streamlined wherever possible—no protruding supports to annoy your customers, no hard-to-clean corners to bother you." There were two basic floor plans at the time. The narrower diners typically had a backbar, counter with storage beneath, and a row of stools—sometimes with booth or table seating at one end of the car. The wider models also included a row of booths or tables along the length of the diner opposite the counter. Electric fans at both ends of the car and over the cooking area ventilated the diner.

Finishes included oak or mahogany; stainless steel, chrome, or copper metal trim; solid bronze or chrome-plated bronze hardware; porcelain enamel or stainless steel fixtures; fluorescent or lumeline light bulbs; Formica or marble countertops; tile or marble counter apron; chrome-plated or porcelain enamel barstools with leather or leatherette tops. The tables and booths had either Formica or marble top tables and benches or chairs with leatherette seats, as well as hat and coat racks.

As to equipment, the pamphlet stated that "All our diners are completely furnished—dishes, silverware, cooking utensils, refrigerator, griddle, short order stove, steam table, coffee urn, work boards and ample storage space for food and 'tools.'" In addition, Worcester diners were wired for electricity, and fitted with pipes for gas, water, and sewer service. Ultimately, the Worcester Diner was tailored to the buyer's specifications:

> THE DESIGN of a dining car often is governed by the size or shape of its location. And every owner has his own ideas about the way his diner should be arranged and equipped. For these reasons, we never build two dining cars exactly alike. Your Worcester Diner is "custom-built," from start to delivery.

The pamphlet includes a plan for a ten-foot six-inch by 40-foot model specially designed for rail shipment. This was the widest model that could be delivered by rail: "This type is designed and built with the same fine material care and craftsmanship as the wider models shown in this booklet. With the utilization of all space, a maximum of efficiency and smooth operation is built into this diner." It is very likely that the design of the Central Diner began with this model and evolved from there. Given Narducci's location adjacent to the rail

yards, he may have chosen this model in order to transport it from Worcester to Providence by train. However, Worcester diners were more typically hauled by truck to their locations within a 500-mile radius of the plant.

As Worcester's lead designer, Charles P. Gemme kept a series of notebooks detailing individual diner plans and notes on refurbishments and moves. One notebook (held by the Worcester Historical Museum) contains Gemme's notes on the structural arrangement of each Worcester diner. For Worcester Lunch Car Company diner #806—Central Diner, Gemme noted that this ten-foot six-inch by forty-foot diner would have an "All Steel" structure and barrel roof, and he specified the number and size of angles, channels, H-beams, I-beams, and truss rods for construction.[15]

Steel-frame construction marked a new challenge for the company. During a 1995 interview, Fred Crepeau, a worker at the Worcester Lunch Car Company, recalled the construction of the Central Diner. He said that the Central Diner job marked a dramatic shift from the standard method of wood-frame construction. Because Providence building code required fireproof construction for the Downtown site, the company struggled to produce its first (and perhaps only) steel-frame diner. He remembered:

> Yeah, I worked on that, and it drove me nuts. Everything we put on that thing we had to screw into those steel posts. The whole frame was all steel. So if the diner burned—all the wood and all the Formica and everything—you'd still have a frame of a diner. Even the rafters were all steel, and bolted onto steel, and the posts were steel, and that porcelain enamel was bolted on to the steel....[16]

Another document related to the design of the Central Diner is a copy of the same plan published in "There's more money in Worcester Diners" with a few of Gemme's handwritten changes. He noted, "No Pans for hood pipes" and "China steam table jars" along the backbar, and "8 Windows only on side" along the front wall. *See drawing 1: Additional Information, page 1.*[17]

A separate volume (now in the collection of the American Diner Museum) includes two drawings for #806. The first drawing is a heavily notated plan that more closely depicts the diner's actual appearance and layout. It describes the diner as steel frame with a barrel roof, 10'-6" x 40'-0", and "All Metal Inside And Outside." The exterior is red porcelain enamel with letters and stripes in yellow and black and a yellow top.

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[15] Worcester Lunch Car Company, Record Book [Construction notes on diners built 1925-1955] in Worcester Lunch Car Company Records, collection of Worcester Historical Museum.
[16] Crepeau, Fred. Interview by Daniel Zilka for the American Diner Project, 23 September 1995. Courtesy of American Diner Museum, Lincoln, R.I.
[17] Worcester Lunch Car Company, "Layout Sketches." Copy in collection of Kim Smith, North Providence, R.I.

The plan shows a stainless steel sliding door centered on the long front elevation and doors beneath overhangs on each of the side elevations.

Inside, fourteen chrome-plated stools upholstered with blue leatherette line the 28 foot by 24 inch Tennessee marble counter that extends from the left end wall. The floor behind the counter is hardwood. The back countertop includes (from left to right): glass display case and refrigerator under a 20 inch window; work bench with window above; china crocks; stainless steel urns and fryers; space for a cash register; a griddle and six burner plates; a counter for condiments, a toastmaster, and work bench under a 23 inch window; and galvanized wire shelves. A streamline porcelain hood, 60 inch bill of fares (menu), and an electrical outlet for a clock were located above. The refrigerator and cabinets were finished in yellow porcelain enamel. *See drawing 2: Additional Information, page 2.*

A second drawing (also in the collection of the American Diner Museum) is an elevation of the under-counter area. From left to right, as if one were sitting on a stool, are "space for two holes"; a pie rack; shelves for glasses; a water cooler; stainless steel sink; a shelf; a 39 inch milk cab.; and additional shelves for glasses. *See drawing 3: Additional Information, page 3.*

While the counter area takes up about two-thirds of the diner, the remaining one-third was given over to two pairs of oak booths upholstered with "Two Tone Blue Leatherette" and fitted with stainless steel and chrome hat trees. The customer seating areas have a tile floor and tile walls. The barrel-vault ceiling is lined with light blue porcelain panels and stainless steel straps. Windows have drop screens, as do the aluminum end vents.

Gemme's notes on the plan indicate that the diner was delivered in yard in August 1947 and then "taken away" in October. It is not known what became of the prior Central Diner. Perhaps it was sold and relocated to another destination. Or, if it was a Worcester diner, it may have been returned to the shop, refurbished, and purchased by another diner operator.

In 1947, the Worcester Lunch Car Company made several sales in Rhode Island. In addition to the Central, other Worcester diners arriving in state that year included the Yankee Clipper at 58 Valley Street in Providence (#807) and the Miss Cranston (#808). At least seven more were manufactured for Rhode Island venues in the following decade: Miss Providence a.k.a. Eastside Diner (#810, 1948), Jigger's Diner in East Greenwich (#826, 1950), Lincoln Diner (#829, 1950), North Kingstown Diner (#832, 1952), Duffy's Diner (#836, 1952) in Central Falls, and the last unit ever to receive a Worcester serial number, Lloyd's Diner in Johnston (#850, 1957).

Diner historian Richard J.S. Gutman notes that despite Worcester's efforts to remain current, the company "was mired in the past." In the 1940s and 1950s, competing manufacturers were producing a new breed of diners with steel frames, stainless steel exteriors, bigger windows, curved glass block corners, and boxier rooflines. These larger diners could accommodate many more patrons. Interior finishes were stainless steel and chrome, as opposed to Worcester's old-fashioned wood furniture. Sales slowed to a trickle in the mid-1950s, and the Worcester Lunch Car Company went out of business in 1961, having rolled out a total of 651 diners since 1906.[18]

The 1951 Sanborn map of West Exchange Street shows a one-story restaurant which appears to have an opening on its west end which connects to a smaller one-story structure. Additional Providence Journal photographs of the area from 1949 and 1951 depict the diner's barrel roof and a striped awning over the windows. A Γ-shaped sign posted atop the east end reads CENTRAL DINER. Taken from the northeast, the 1951 photograph reveals some of the stainless steel windows on the back (north) of the diner. Narducci remained in business at 27 West Exchange Street through 1953.[19]

Central Diner: From Downtown to Elmwood

On April 1, 1953, Central Diner Co. Inc. received a building permit to erect a one-story, 8 inch cinderblock diner kitchen at 777 Elmwood Avenue, just a few blocks north of Roger Williams Park. The architect was L.E. Carlone and the builders Campanella & Cardi. The kitchen was built to accommodate the newly relocated Central Diner, which arrived on site between 1953 and 1954. The Sanborn map from 1955 reveals that while the diner and new kitchen were in place in Elmwood, the parcel at the corner of West Exchange and Gaspee streets had been cleared for a parking lot.[20]

When "Truck" Narducci trucked his diner down Elmwood Avenue in 1953 or 1954, the stretch of Elmwood Avenue south of Columbus Square had already undergone a substantial transformation from streetcar suburb to automobile zone. Horse cars had long given way to trolleys, and trolleys to buses on Elmwood Avenue. When the street was designated a part of U.S. Route 1 (before 1918), public transportation had to

[18] Gutman, *Worcester Lunch Car Company*, 101.
[19] Sanborn Map Company, *Insurance Maps of Providence, R.I.*, vol. 1 (New York: Sanborn Map Co., 1920, revised 1951), 19; Providence Journal Photographic Archives, 1949-51; Providence city directories.
[20] Building permits for 777 Elmwood Avenue, copies courtesy of Carol DeFeciani; Sanborn Map Company, *Insurance Maps of Providence, R.I.* , vol. 1 (New York: Sanborn Map Co., 1956), 19.

share the road with automobiles. Businesses that catered to car drivers proliferated: garages, filling stations, car salesrooms, and automobile service department buildings.[21]

Much of this automobile-related infrastructure was in place by the mid-1950s. The fourteen blocks of Elmwood Avenue between Columbus Square and Interstate 95 contained five filling stations, four auto sales and service shops, four used car dealers, the R.I. Public Transit Authority bus garage, a tire sales and service store, and an automobile upholstery dealer. Other local businesses included a paint shop, F.D. McKendall Lumber Company yard, the Swiss Cleansing Company plant, and across the street from the diner, the Elmwood Theatre, which had opened in 1950.[22]

The automobile zone in South Elmwood was reinforced by the construction of the North-South Expressway (now Interstate 95) in the 1950s and 1960s. In 1945, the R.I. Department of Public Works initiated highway design development of what became I-95, I-195, and other highways. In 1956, the administration of President Dwight D. Eisenhower created the Interstate highway system, which provided a 90% Federal to 10% State funding ratio. Rhode Island voters approved three bond issues to raise the State's share between 1955 and 1964. With some early phases already complete and the successful purchase of land and buildings along the I-95 right-of-way, construction began on the main roadways from the Massachusetts state line to R.I. Route 10 in Cranston in late 1961. The last segment to be completed (in December 1965) stretched between Exit 18 (Thurbers Avenue) south to Exit 17 (Elmwood Avenue) and on to Exit 16 (R.I. Route 10).[23]

By the 1950s, diners had become familiar fixtures in roadside locations. While diners were born in city retail, factory, and theatre districts in the early twentieth century, they began to appear along highways to feed hungry drivers in the 1920s. There may have been a diner in Elmwood as early as 1928, when Albert Lindberg of Elmwood Avenue purchased a 10 foot by 22 foot 3 inch Worcester diner. Even though Ralph Narducci had moved his diner 2.75 miles southwest from Providence's central business district to the automobile zone, he retained the business name Central Diner during his tenure through 1968. His successor, Christopher Artegian, continued to operate the Central Diner through 1972.[24]

In the following decades, the Central Diner has witnessed sporadic closures, a parade of operators, and a series of names. The diner was not listed in the city directory between 1973 and 1976 and may have been

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[21] R.I. Historical Preservation Commission, *Elmwood, Providence: Statewide Historical Preservation Report – P-P-3* (Providence: RIHPC, 1979), 26, 32. Although the Central's downtown and Elmwood locations were close to railroad tracks, it is much more likely that the diner was moved by truck than by train.

[22] Sanborn Map Company, *Insurance Maps of Providence, R.I.*, vol. 5 (New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1956), 43.

[23] Steve Anderson, "North-South Expressway Historic Overview." at www.bostonroads.com/roads/I-95_RI/.

[24] *American Diner,* 71; Providence city directories.

closed temporarily. Narducci continued as owner at least through April 25, 1975, when he received a permit to erect a new mansard roof over the existing roof and apply Textured-111 pressed wood siding beneath the windows. From photographs and other accounts, it does not appear that the mansard roof was installed; however, the siding was applied and remained intact until the mid-1990s.[25]

Beginning in the mid-1960s, diner design shifted from stainless steel and streamline to more rustic materials and historicizing styles. Diner experts Brian Butko and Kevin Patrick call this trend the "Environmental style." Colonial and Mediterranean motifs, mansard and gable roofs, and materials like brick, stone, and wood paneling adorned new and remodeled diners. Narducci's builder for the 1975 project was Edward Degrandere, who is listed as operator of the Elmwood Diner in 1977.[26]

The next name associated with the Elmwood Diner was Philip D. O'Donnell, who received a building permit on November 24, 1987 to erect a one-story, 20 foot 3 inch by 20 foot 3 inch dining room addition on the rear northwestern corner of the building. The addition, which was to cost $10,000, was designed by an architect named Nalbandian (first name unknown). O'Donnell is listed as diner operator in the 1988 city directory. By 1990, it was called Jim's Diner. By 1993, Jennifer Davis had purchased the diner and renamed it Jenn's Elmwood Diner, where she served soul food on Saturdays. A photograph of the diner from this period shows the lower half covered with wood siding and the stainless steel entrance vestibule is unpainted. According to photographs, the stainless steel vestibule was installed between 1956 and the 1970s.[27]

In the last decades of the twentieth century, Americans began to rediscover the history and architecture of the diner. In 1977, Pawtucket, Rhode Island's Modern Diner (1941) was the nation's first diner to be nominated to the National Register of Historic Places. Additional nominations came in from around the country, and a wave of diner restoration projects soon followed.

In Providence, two major museum projects reaffirmed the city's claim as the birthplace of the diner. Former patrons of the Ever Ready Diner (Worcester #549, built in 1926 for a location in Waterville, Maine) purchased the structure and donated it to the Culinary Archives & Museum at Johnson & Wales University in 1989. The Ever Ready is undergoing restoration as part of a diner history exhibit titled "Diners: Still Cookin' in

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[25] Building permits for 777 Elmwood Avenue, copies courtesy of Carol DeFeciani. Providence city directories. RIHPC survey sheet for 777 Elmwood Avenue; Photograph of Roberto's Cafe, ca 1990s, collection of Denise Bass.

[26] Randy Garbin, *Diners of New England* (Mechanicsburg, Penn.: Stackpole Books, 2005), xiii-iv; Building permits; Providence city directories.

[27] Building permits; Providence city directories; "Providence Police News," *Providence Journal* (July 13, 1990); Donna Lee, "Get a taste of Elmwood's restaurants," *Providence Journal* (17 March 1993); Photograph of Jenn's Elmwood Diner, ca 1990s, courtesy of Denise Bass.

the 21st Century." In 1996, the American Diner Museum mounted an exhibit at the Rhode Island Historical Society: "Sandwiches, Pies and Coffee: The Beginnings of the American Diner."

The Central Diner was rediscovered by new operators who appreciated its historic character and renovated the restaurant as the Ole Elmwood Diner. Working with the American Diner Museum, Paul Truman and Steve Calabro overhauled the structure, removing siding, repairing windows, removing grease, and reinstalling old fixtures. Around 1997 or 1998 it was known as Louie's Diner. In 1999 the diner was owned by Robert Lama, who called it Roberto's Cafe. By 2004, it was La Criolla Restaurant, serving Dominican food.[28]

In 2006, Elmwood resident Carol DeFeciani purchased the property and initiated the Central Diner's latest makeover. Improvements include upgrading the electrical system and replacing the heating system; repairing the doors and barrel roof; replacing missing light fixtures and windows; rebuilding the vestibule; and dramatically removing the exterior cladding and stripping several layers of paint from the original porcelain panels.

Historian Richard Gutman remarked that in 2004, only about 90 of the 651 diners built by the Worcester Lunch Car Company survive. In Rhode Island, only four documented Worcester diners are still in operation today—the Right Spot (formerly known as Brothers) in Pawtucket; Jigger's in East Greenwich; the State Line Diner (Worcester #846, 1953 or 1955) which was relocated to Foster from Southbridge, Massachusetts; and the Central Diner in Elmwood.[29]

The Central Diner's latest name is The Liberty Elm, signaling the owner's pledge to direct one percent of profits to purchase new disease-resistant American Liberty Elm trees for Elmwood Avenue. The elm trees that once lined Elmwood Avenue have succumbed to Dutch Elm disease or street widening. DeFeciani intends to replant the elms in Elmwood and keep the coffee brewing for neighborhood residents and commuters headed down the avenue.[30]

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[28] Thomas J. Morgan, "Diner Redux: Taste of the Past" in *Providence Journal* (27 June 1995), p. D1; Legal Notices, *Providence Journal* (16 July 1999).

[29] Another half-dozen Worcester diners are in Rhode Island undergoing or awaiting restoration. While the Hope Diner in Bristol and the Wickford Diner in North Kingstown share some Worcester design attributes, their builders are presently undocumented.

[30] Natalie Myers, "Lunch car becomes South Side diner" in *Providence Business News* (27 August 2007).

Criteria Consideration B

While the Central Diner (1947) now stands in its second location, its move from 27 West Exchange Street to 777 Elmwood Avenue occurred in 1953-54, within the period of significance and more than fifty years ago. Although moved buildings are typically excluded from the National Register, the Central Diner retained its significance after its relocation. Diners were designed to move. They were built small and sturdy in order to be delivered by truck or rail to their sites. The Worcester Lunch Car Company in particular offered customers the opportunity to ship their diners back to the factory for refurbishment and return, and the firm sold a number of used diners to new customers. In the case of the Central Diner, the relocation is part of the significant history of a diner that evolved to fit Providence's changing urban environment.

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Worcester Lunch Car Company Records. Collection of American Diner Museum, Lincoln, R.I.

Worcester Lunch Car Company Records. Collection of Worcester Historical Museum, Worcester, Mass.

Verbal boundary description

Providence Tax Assessor's Plat 60, Lot 1

Verbal boundary justification

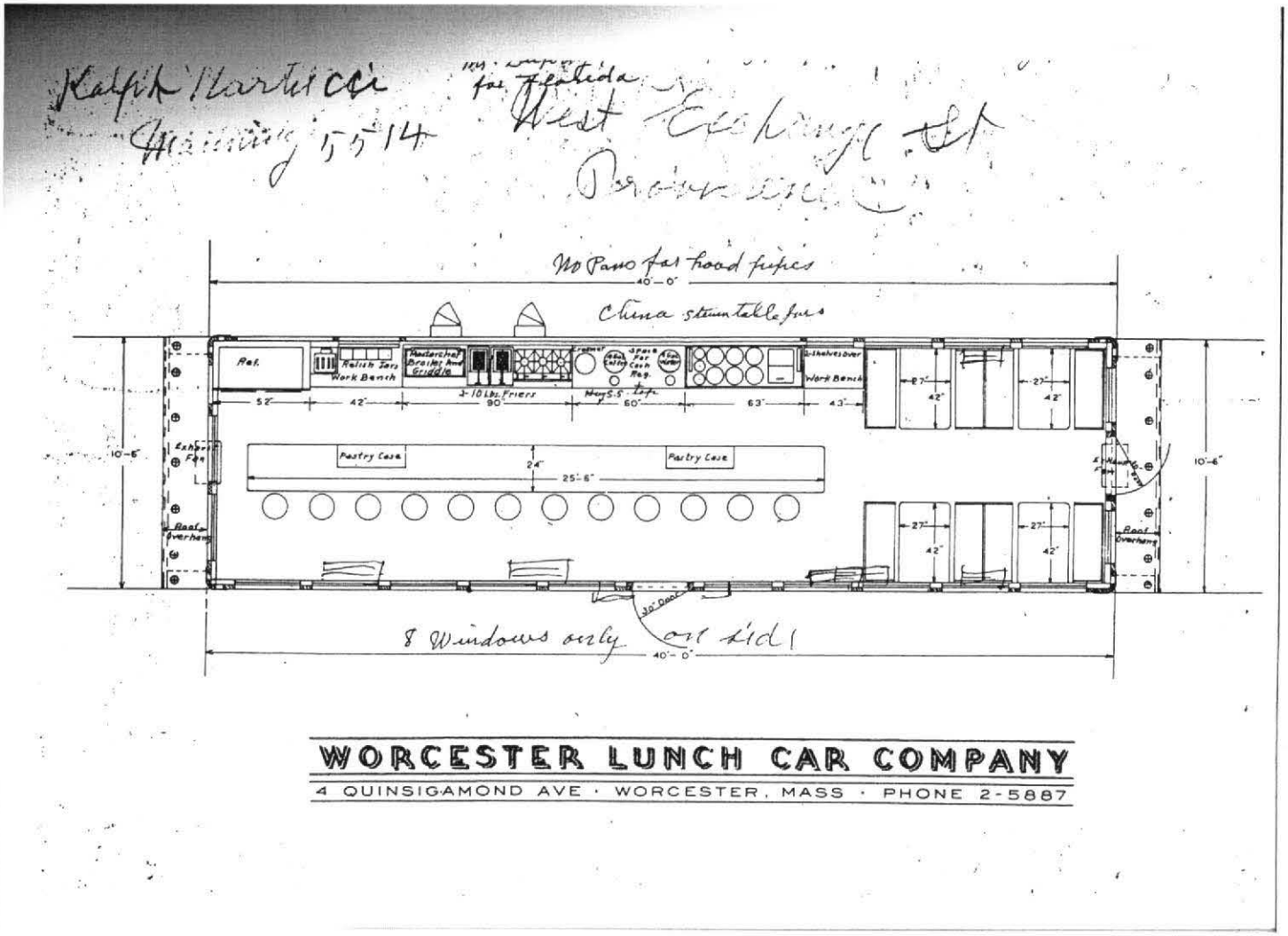
The nominated property includes the parcel associated with Central Diner since its relocation to 777 Elmwood Avenue ca. 1953-54. The boundaries of the lot remain unchanged.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES CONTINUATION SHEET

Central Diner	Providence	Providence County, R.I.
Name of Property	City/Town	County and State

Section Number Add'l Info Page 1

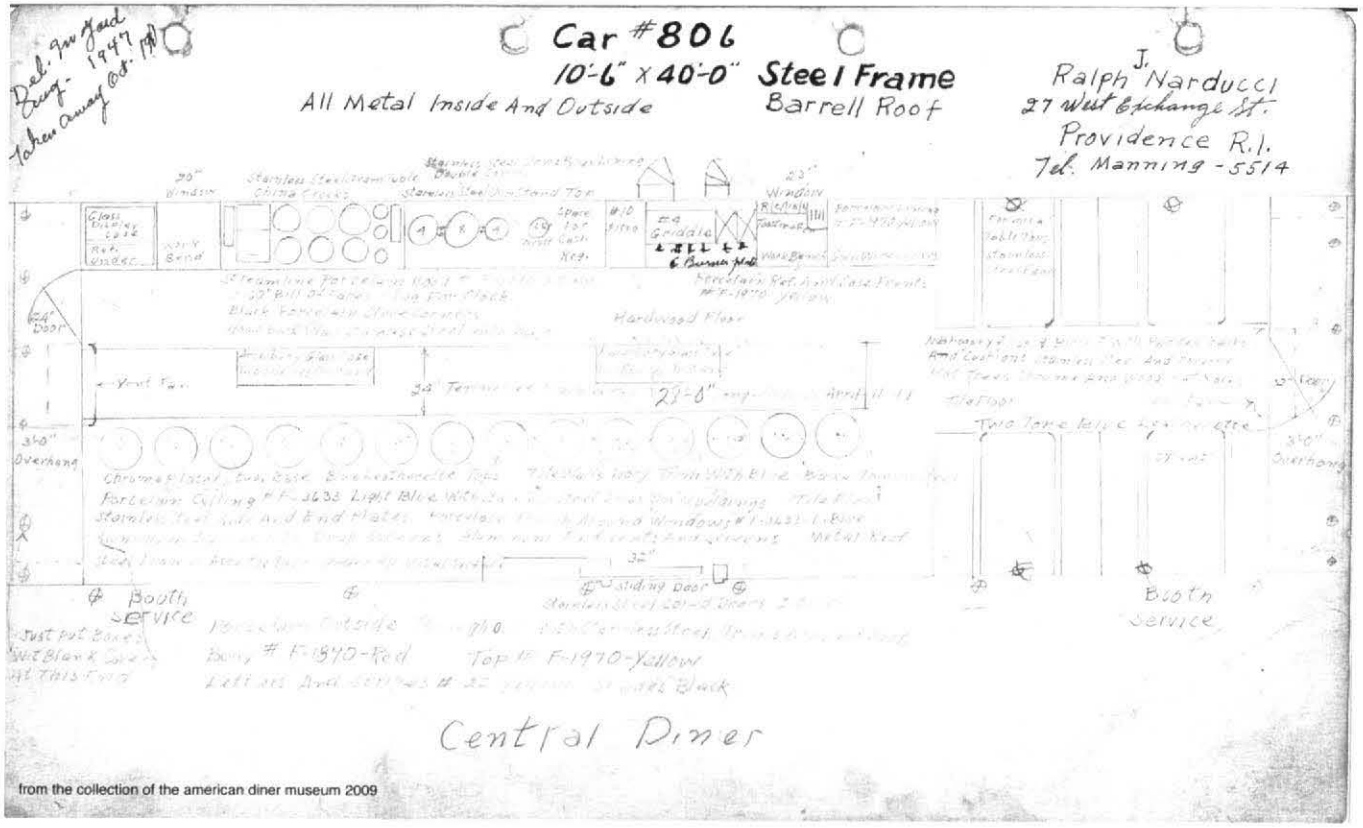


Drawing 1: [Car #806], ca. 1947 in Worcester Lunch Car Company, "Layout Sketches," ca 1920s-1957. Copies courtesy of Kim Smith, Moosup, CT.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES CONTINUATION SHEET

Central Diner		Providence	Providence County, R.I.
Name of Property		City/Town	County and State
Section Number	Add'l Info	Page	2



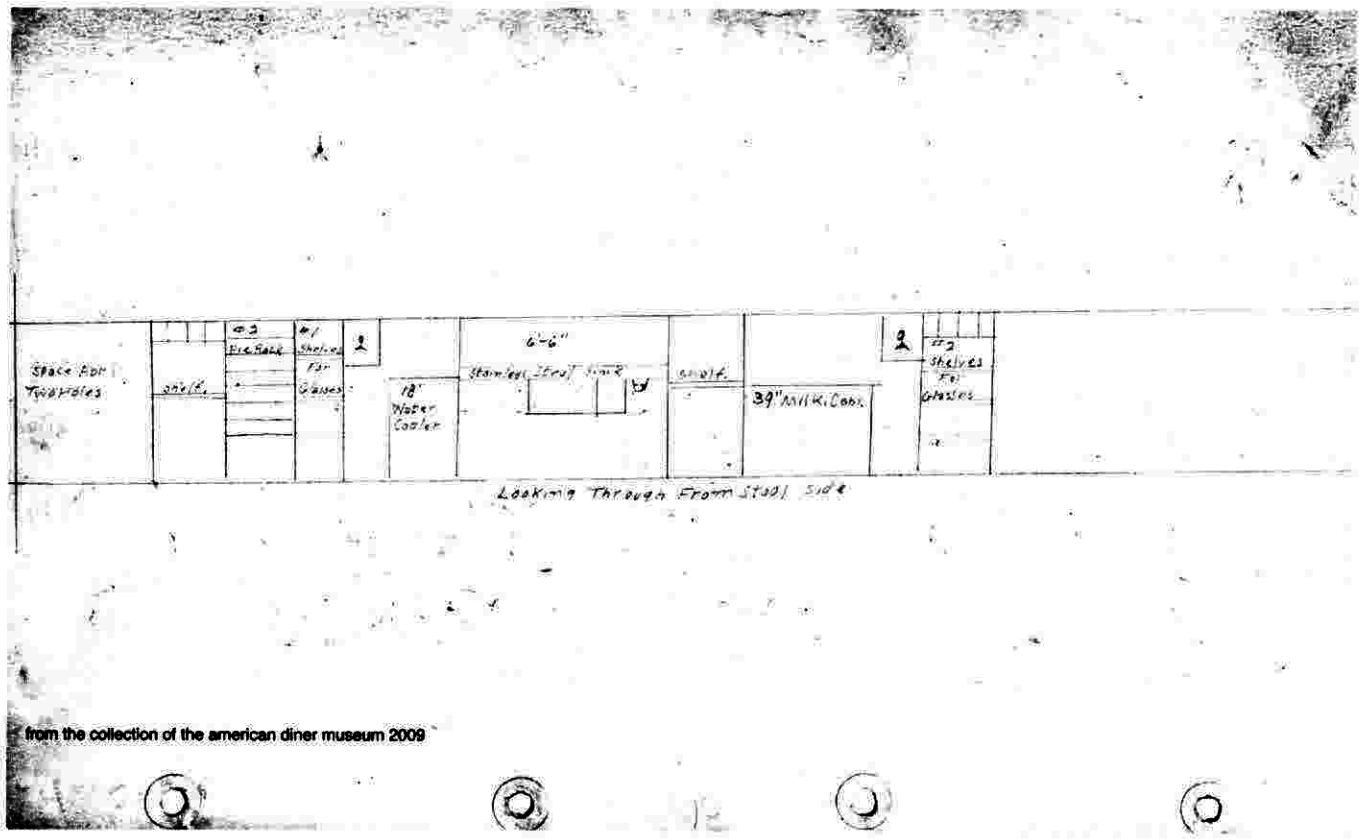
Drawing 2: Car #806, ca. 1947 (page 1 of 2) in Worcester Lunch Car Company Records. Collection of American Diner Museum, Lincoln, R.I.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES CONTINUATION SHEET

Central Diner	Providence	Providence County, R.I.
Name of Property	City/Town	County and State

Section Number Add'l Info Page 3



Drawing 3: Car #806, ca. 1947 (page 2 of 2) in Worcester Lunch Car Company Records. Collection of American Diner Museum, Lincoln, R.I.

777
BOOTH SERVICE
COME ON IN! WE'RE OPEN!
THE LIBERTY ELM
COFFEE SHOP • JUICE BAR
FREE WI-FI

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SERVICE
BOOTH
SERVICE

COME ON IN! WE'RE OPEN!
THE LIBERTY ELM
COFFEE SHOP • JUICE BAR
BOOTH
SERVICE
COFFEE

Yacht Club
1915

FRESH DAILY
WE ACCEPT
CASH
BUNN