

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

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 an 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 Insurance Company of North America Building

other names/site number _____

2. Location

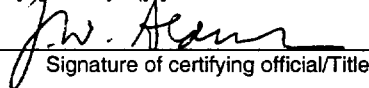
street & number 99 John Street [] not for publication

city or town New York [] vicinity

state New York code NY county New York code 061 zip code 10038

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this [x] 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 as set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property [x] meets [] does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant [] nationally [] statewide [x] locally. ([] see continuation sheet for additional comments.)


Signature of certifying official/Title

Deputy Commissioner for Historic Preservation 22 Sept-99
Date

New York State Office of Parks, Recreation & Historic Preservation
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

[] removed from the National Register

[] other (explain) _____

Signature of the Keeper

date of action

Insurance Company of North America Building

Name of Property

New York County, New York

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)

☒ building(s)
☐ district
☐ site
☐ structure
☐ object

Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	buildings
<u> </u>	<u> </u>	sites
<u> </u>	<u> </u>	structures
<u> </u>	<u> </u>	objects
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	TOTAL

Name of related multiple property listing

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

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(enter categories from instructions)

COMMERCE/ Office Building-Insurance

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

RESIDENTIAL/Apartments

COMMERCE

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions)

MODERN MOVEMENT/ Art Deco

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation granite

walls granite; limestone; aluminum; brick

roof membrane roofing

other bronze; terrazzo; marble; stainless steel;
chrome-nickel steel

Narrative Description

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

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**National Register of Historic Places
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Insurance Company of North America Building
Name of Property
New York County, New York
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7. Narrative Description

The former Insurance Company of North America Building at 99 John Street is a 28-story, Art Deco, steel-frame skyscraper, built in 1932 to the designs of Shreve, Lamb, and Harmon. The L-shaped building is set on an irregular lot that fronts John, Gold, and Cliff Streets. A four-story annex was added to the north end of the Gold Street facade in the 1930s or 1940s, constructed of the same materials and continuing the building design. 99 John Street is located in a densely built up section of downtown Manhattan, surrounded primarily by twentieth-century office buildings. Originally, 99 John Street shared a party wall with a seven-story, late nineteenth-century building on the rear (north) facade of the building. This building has since been demolished in order to create a parking lot, and the concrete party wall of 99 John Street is now exposed. The building is nearing completion of a major rehabilitation to convert it from office to residential use.

The massing of the 28-story building consists of a series of five setbacks, culminating in a square two-story penthouse. The building has a strong vertical emphasis with a minimum of ornament. The low base course and doorways on the first floor are faced in dark gray granite. Fluted limestone panels extend full height from the granite base to a limestone band above. Fixed pane storefront windows with top and bottom hopper windows, set within the limestone pillars, are evenly spaced around the three primary facades. Limestone piers extend from the second story to the top of the building. The new one-over-one aluminum windows, which closely resemble the original steel, alternate with the limestone piers. The windows, in turn, alternate vertically with dark aluminum spandrels. The windows are highlighted by strips of chrome-nickel steel that run the full height of the building.

The primary entrance to the main lobby is located in the center bay on John Street. This recessed entrance is framed by a rounded polished granite architrave and contains a new ADA-compliant door detailed to compliment the original design features. The two original doors in this entry are made of bright steel with bronze trim and pushbars, a design theme used on the interior doors as well. A large glass panel with channeled chrome-nickel steel mullions is set in the vestibule above the doors, and decorative metal grilles top the side vestibule walls. The vestibule floor is covered in the original terrazzo, with a swirling circular pattern under the revolving doors.

The entrances on the chamfered corners of Cliff and John Streets, and Gold and John Streets lead into the commercial spaces on the first floor. The Cliff and John Street entrance consists of a new ADA-compliant door with an original chrome-nickel steel grille above, flanked by fluted limestone pillars. A rounded metal canopy with incised lettering, dating from the 1940s or 1950s, has been added above the door. The Gold and John Street entrance had been altered, and a modern steel and glass storefront with double doors has been added.

Most of the significant interior spaces have remained, including the main lobby, and most of the upper elevator lobbies and the offices spaces in the cellar. Access to the cross-shaped main lobby is through the center John Street entrance. The straight hall heads into two short elevator halls, each containing six elevators with detailed metal doors. Polished marble panels line the lobby walls, inset with distinctive chrome-nickel steel linear

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details. White and black terrazzo flooring are likewise set in a linear pattern. Other original Art Deco details remain, including the stainless steel mail collection boxes, display windows, and grilles. Originally, murals by famed muralist Edward Trumbull were above the marble wall panels in the main hall; these murals were removed by previous tenants and replaced with the non-historic murals from the 1970s. The annex lobby, or north lobby, curves from the original lobby and features similar finishes as the main lobby, including marble wainscoting, white and black terrazzo flooring set in a linear pattern, fluted marble pilasters, and ceiling trim. Original bright steel doors with bronze rails remain in both the main and annex lobbies.

The upstairs elevator lobbies were originally configured to accommodate both local stops at the lower floors (west bank) and express stops for the upper floors (east bank). The elevator banks were connected by small mail chute lobbies. Each lobby featured handsome beige marble wainscoting with green trim, terrazzo floors, and coved plaster ceilings, many of which had been impacted by contemporary dropped ceilings. The west elevator lobbies were removed on floors 2 through 11 during the recent rehabilitation. The east elevator lobbies were retained throughout and the historic marble finishes, ceilings, and floors were retained. The mail chute lobbies were retained on floors 2 through 4. As built, the first floor commercial spaces and upper floor tenant spaces were open, with a minimum of columns or detail. These spaces have been altered over time and the additions of modern finishes (late-vintage gypsum board, vinyl tile flooring and carpeting, and drop-in tile ceilings) had resulted in either the obscuring or removal of historic finishes.

The small office spaces in the cellar are the only significant, non-lobby spaces remaining. The configuration of the office spaces in the cellar is distinctive, particularly the elongated hexagonal room. These office spaces are reached by a sharply turned stair, and the stairwell walls are covered in polished marble. Notable architectural details in the office spaces include plaster cove moldings and grilles with nautical and Art Deco motifs.

99 John Street has retained a high degree of architectural integrity. The exterior of the building has undergone little change during the recent rehabilitation and the primary interior significant spaces are likewise intact.

Insurance Company of North America Building

Name of Property

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 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
- ☒ **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 boxes that apply.)

- ☐ **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

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 67) 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 Building Survey

- ☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record

New York County, New York

County and State

Areas of Significance:

(Enter categories from instructions)

Architecture

Commerce

Period of Significance:

1932-1949

Significant Dates:

1932

Significant Person:

Cultural Affiliation:

Architect/Builder:

Shreve, Lamb & Harmon Architects

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8. Narrative Statement of Significance

99 John Street, the former Insurance Company of North America Building, is a highly significant building that meets Criterion C as an important exemplar of the final group of skyscrapers erected in New York City prior to the virtual cessation of building during the Great Depression and World War II and the introduction of Modernism into the world of corporate design after the war. The significance of the building was recognized as soon as it was completed, notably by prominent architectural critic Lewis Mumford, who believed that the skyscraper had “pretty much reached the peak of its development” with this building.¹ The twenty-eight-story building gains additional significance as an outstanding example of the work of Shreve, Lamb & Harmon, one of New York City’s most important and innovative firms involved in skyscraper design in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The building is an excellent example of the simple and honest skyscraper aesthetic favored by this firm and its design, construction, and massing illustrate the economics of the speculative skyscraper. The former Insurance Company of North America Building is also significant under Criterion A for its association with the history of the insurance industry in the United States during the early twentieth century.

It was in his “Sky Line” column, published in the *New Yorker*, that Lewis Mumford analyzed the design of 99 John Street in an especially cogent manner. Mumford expressed his appreciation of the “beautiful directness of the structure” and found it to be “a much more resolute design” than the more famous Empire State Building since it had none of the “meaningless” ornamental flourishes of the taller building. In fact, Mumford, saw the simple and restrained design, devoid of inappropriate ornamental flourishes, as the final expression of the skyscraper form. “There is,” he said, “nothing left to be done in the design of business buildings but repeat this fundamental pattern.”² Robert Stern and the co-authors of *New York 1930* take Mumford’s accolade even further, noting that the facade design of 99 John Street “signaled the arrival of a new, Modernist conception of architectural aesthetics as the direct extension of technological process.”³ Thus, both Mumford and Stern interpreted 99 John Street as the last step in the development of the skyscraper prior to the introduction of the International Style with the post-war design of Lever House in 1950.

The building at 99 John Street was erected to house the New York offices of the Insurance Company of North America, as well as the offices of other insurance companies that would lease space on the upper floors. The Insurance Company of North America is one of the oldest insurance companies in the country. It was established in Philadelphia in 1792 and grew into a firm involved with marine, fire, life, and other types of insurance. While retaining its corporate headquarters in Philadelphia, the company expanded its presence in New York City, especially in the period following the Civil War. According to a corporate history, the New York offices became “the most important single outpost of the company.”⁴ By the 1920s, branches of the company occupied space in several buildings in Lower Manhattan. The marine insurance division was housed in

¹ Lewis Mumford, “The Sky Line: Skyscrapers and Tenements,” *The New Yorker* 9 (June 3, 1933), p.36.

² Ibid.

³ Robert A.M. Stern, Gregory Gilmartin, and Thomas Mellins, *New York 1930: Architecture and Urbanism Between the Two World Wars* (New York: Rizzoli, 1987), p. 537.

⁴ Marquis James, *Biography of a Business 1792-1942: Insurance Company of North America* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1942), p. 336.

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the Delmonico's Building on Beaver Street, which it had purchased in 1920 shortly after Delmonico's Restaurant went out of business. The fire insurance offices were in rental space on William Street, indemnity was on John Street, and a subsidiary, the Alliance Casualty Company, was on Maiden Lane.

In 1932 the directors of the Insurance Company of North America decided to change the way their business was done in New York City. Most of the individual divisions were merged and a building was erected on John Street between Gold Street and Cliff Street to house the various divisions. The site chosen for the new building was in the heart of the John Street Insurance District that had developed on John Street between Nassau Street and Pearl Street in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The construction of 99 John Street was part of the important development of skyscrapers erected to house insurance companies, and it remains one of the outstanding buildings within this cluster of commercial high rises.

The design for 99 John Street was provided by skyscraper specialists Shreve, Lamb & Harmon. This firm is best known for the Empire State Building, but was responsible for several other important skyscrapers in the late 1920s and early 1930s, notably 500 Fifth Avenue, the Bankers Trust Company Extension at 14 Wall Street, the Reynolds Tobacco Company Building in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and the Insurance Company of North America Building at 99 John Street. Although often associated with the "Art Deco" because of the flamboyant tower atop the Empire State Building, Shreve, Lamb & Harmon actually abhorred the decorative ornamental quality of such skyscrapers as the Chrysler and Chanin buildings. The firm was much more interested in creating stripped down facades that accentuated the verticality of skyscraper massing, providing clients with economical yet beautiful buildings. The firm's skyscrapers of the early 1930s have an affinity with the work of Raymond Hood, especially in their verticality and the use of simple window spandrels. This is not surprising since Hood and William Lamb were close friends.

Construction was announced in early 1932.⁵ This was one of the few major office buildings, besides John D. Rockefeller, Jr.'s Rockefeller Center buildings, that was begun in the early 1930s as the effect of the stock market crash virtually halted major construction and building rental in New York City. It is a reflection of the success of the Insurance Company of North America that it was capable of erecting this building in 1932-33. In order to start collecting rental income as fast as possible, most skyscrapers in the 1920s and early 1930s were erected as rapidly as possible. Unfortunately, the laying of the building's foundations took longer than had been anticipated. Bedrock lies about eighty feet below the curb, beneath a layer of hardpan and boulders, and a stratum of wet sand. A decision was made not to use traditional caissons for the foundations but to support the building on concrete-filled steel pipes.⁶ Difficulty in actually locating bedrock delayed work, thus requiring additional speed in the construction of the building's frame. The steelwork was laid in just twenty-two working days, with the construction of each floor carried on immediately after its steel frame was completed.⁷ The building was ready to receive tenants only fifteen months after plans were filed.

⁵ Plans 25-Story Building.; *New York Times*, January 30, 1932, p. 32.

⁶ The foundations are discussed in "Foundation Construction," *Architectural Record* 74 (August 1933), p. 91.

⁷ "Two Skyscrapers Will Open This Week; RCA and John Street Buildings Ready," *New York Times*, April 30, 1933, p. 2.

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As planned, 99 John Street was to house the main New York office of the Insurance Company of North America on the corner of John and Cliff Streets, with clerical offices on the lower floors of the building and conference and meeting rooms in the basement. The remainder of the building was planned to appeal to other insurance companies interested in leasing space on John Street, thus maximizing the profitability of the building. The floors had to have a minimum number of columns in order to provide space for the desks of large numbers of clerical workers; space close to windows was to be maximized; few private offices were to be constructed; large areas were to be set aside for filing and storage in the sections of the building that were not near windows; and the plan was to be flexible in order to provide space for both large and small companies.⁸ The building was quite successful in attracting tenants. Even in the depths of the depression, when the building was completed, many insurance-related businesses rented space. In its distinguished architecture and its connection to a major insurance company dating back to the late eighteenth century, the building holds an important place among the insurance-related buildings which cluster in this area of Lower Manhattan.

Most importantly, the Insurance Company of North America Building is among the few key structures in the evolution of the skyscraper esthetic. Since the time it was constructed, authorities have seen the building as a paradigm of a very point in the development of the skyscraper. This is the moment when the skyscraper returned to its original ideal of clarity and restraint after decades of historicizing ornament. While the building no longer houses the Insurance Company of North America, it remains as a major example of pre-World War II skyscraper design and as an important example of the work of Shreve, Lamb & Harmon and this firm's efforts to design simple and restrained, yet beautiful and profitable skyscrapers for corporate clients.

⁸ "Insurance Company of North America New York Branch Building," *Architectural Record* 74 (August 1933), p. 91.

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9. Bibliography

- Carr, William H.A., *Perils Named and Unnamed: The Story of the Insurance Company of North America* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967).
- Diemand, John A., *"Insurance Company of North America": Protector of American Property since 1792* (New York: Newcomen Society of North America, 1953).
- "Foundation Construction": *Architectural Record* 74 (August 1933).
- "Insurance Company of North America New York Branch Building," *Architectural Record* 74 (August 1933).
- James, Marquis, *Biography of a Business 1792-1942: Insurance Company of North America* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1942).
- Mumford, Lewis, "The Sky Line" Skyscrapers and Tenements," *The New Yorker* 9 (June 3, 1933).
- New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, "Empire State Building Designation Report," report written by Anthony W. Robins (New York: Landmarks Preservation Commission, 1981).
- "Open New Building," *New York Times*, May 3, 1933, p. 32.
- "Plans 25-Story Building," *New York Times*, January 30, 1932, p. 32.
- Stern, Robert A.M., Gregory Gilmartin, and Thomas Mellins, *New York 1930: Architecture and Urbanism Between the Two World Wars* (New York: Rizzoli, 1987).
- "Two Skyscrapers Open This Week; RCA and John Street Buildings Ready," *New York Times*, April 30, 1933, p.2.

Insurance Company of North America Building

New York County, New York

Name of Property

County and State

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property less than one acre

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1 | 1 | 8 | | 5 | 8 | 3 | 9 | 3 | 9 | | 4 | 5 | 0 | 6 | 6 | 3 | 9 |
Zone Easting Northing

3 | 1 | 8 | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
Zone Easting Northing

2 | 1 | 8 | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

4 | 1 | 8 | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

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 (see continuation sheet)

name/title Contact: Kathleen Howe, Historic Preservation Specialist

organization NYSOPRHP- Field Services Bureau date July 16, 1999

street & number Peebles Island telephone (518) 237-8643 ext. 3266

city or town Waterford state NY zip code 12188

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 SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

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

name 99 John Street, LLC

street & number 309 East 45th Street telephone (212) 697-4422

city or town New York state NY zip code 10017

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 to amend existing 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, D.C. 20503

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10. Geographical Data

Verbal Boundary Description

The boundary of this nomination is outlined on the accompanying New York City Land Book map.

Boundary Justification

The boundary includes the entire irregular lot bound by John, Gold, and Cliff Streets including the original building and the annex.

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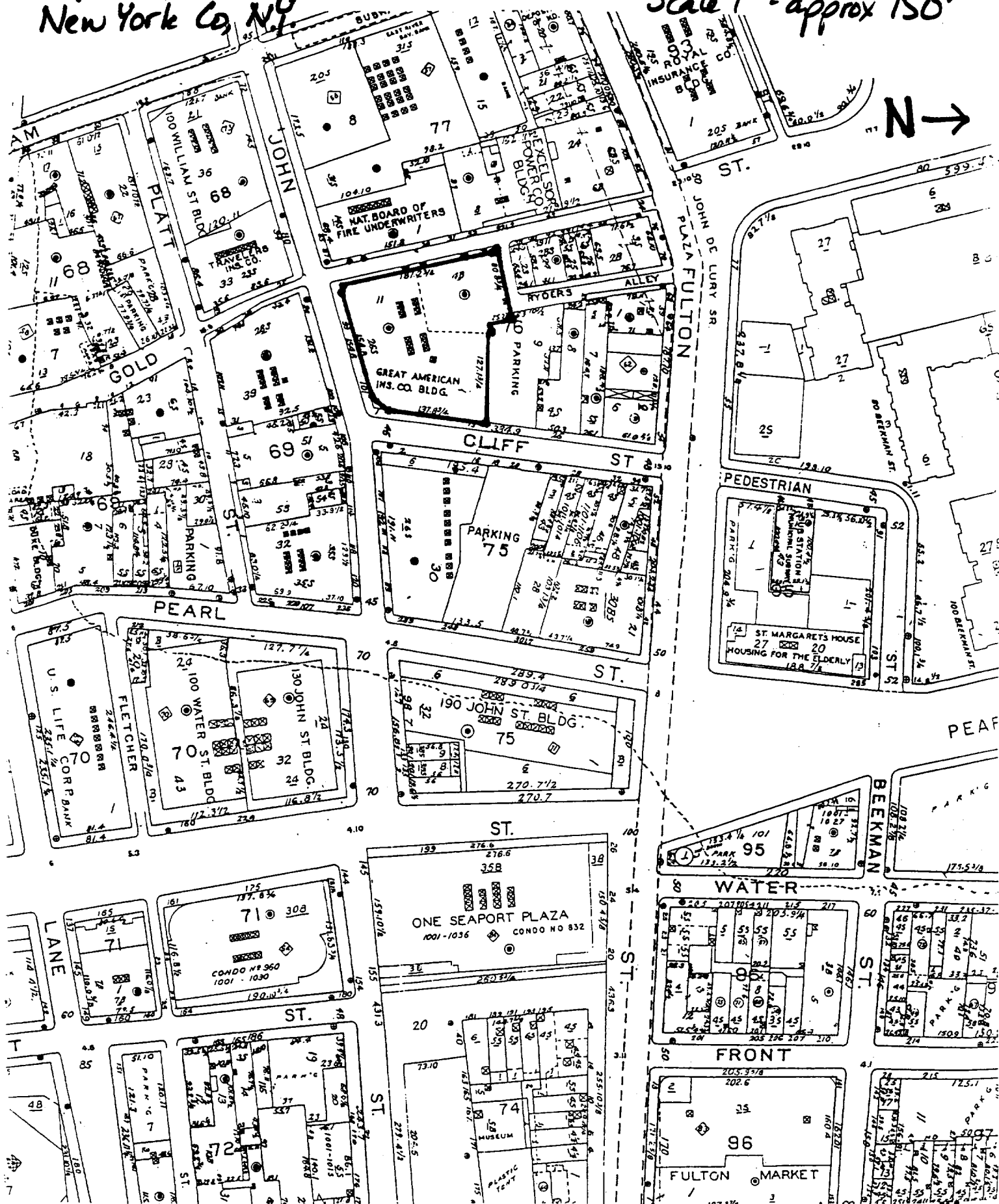
11. Form Prepared By

Andrew S. Dolkart
Higgins & Quasebarth
270 Lafayette Street, Suite 810
New York, NY 10012

Insurance Company of North America Building
99 John St.
New York Co, NY

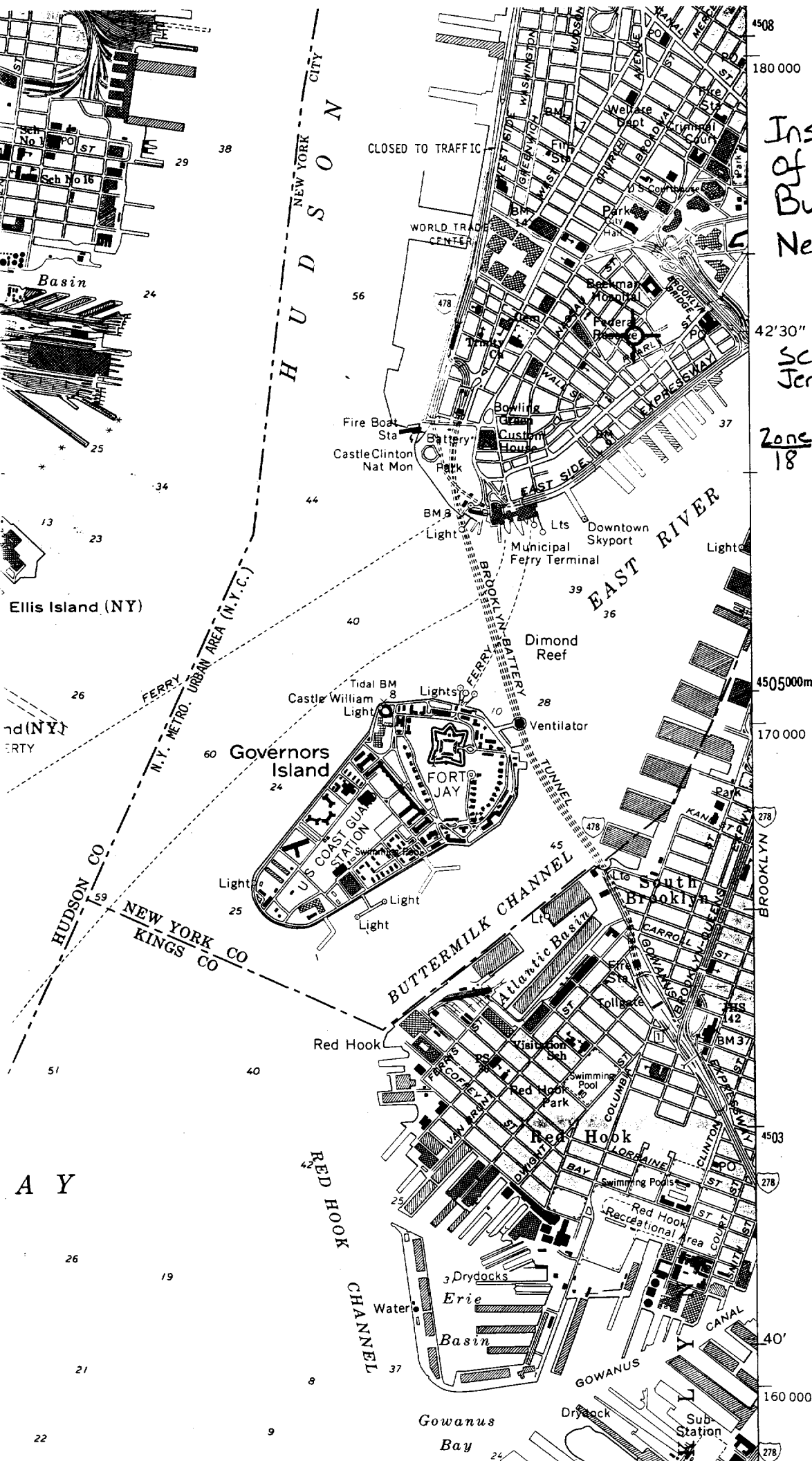
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Sanborn Map, 1999
Plate 4

Nominated property shown with
heavy line.



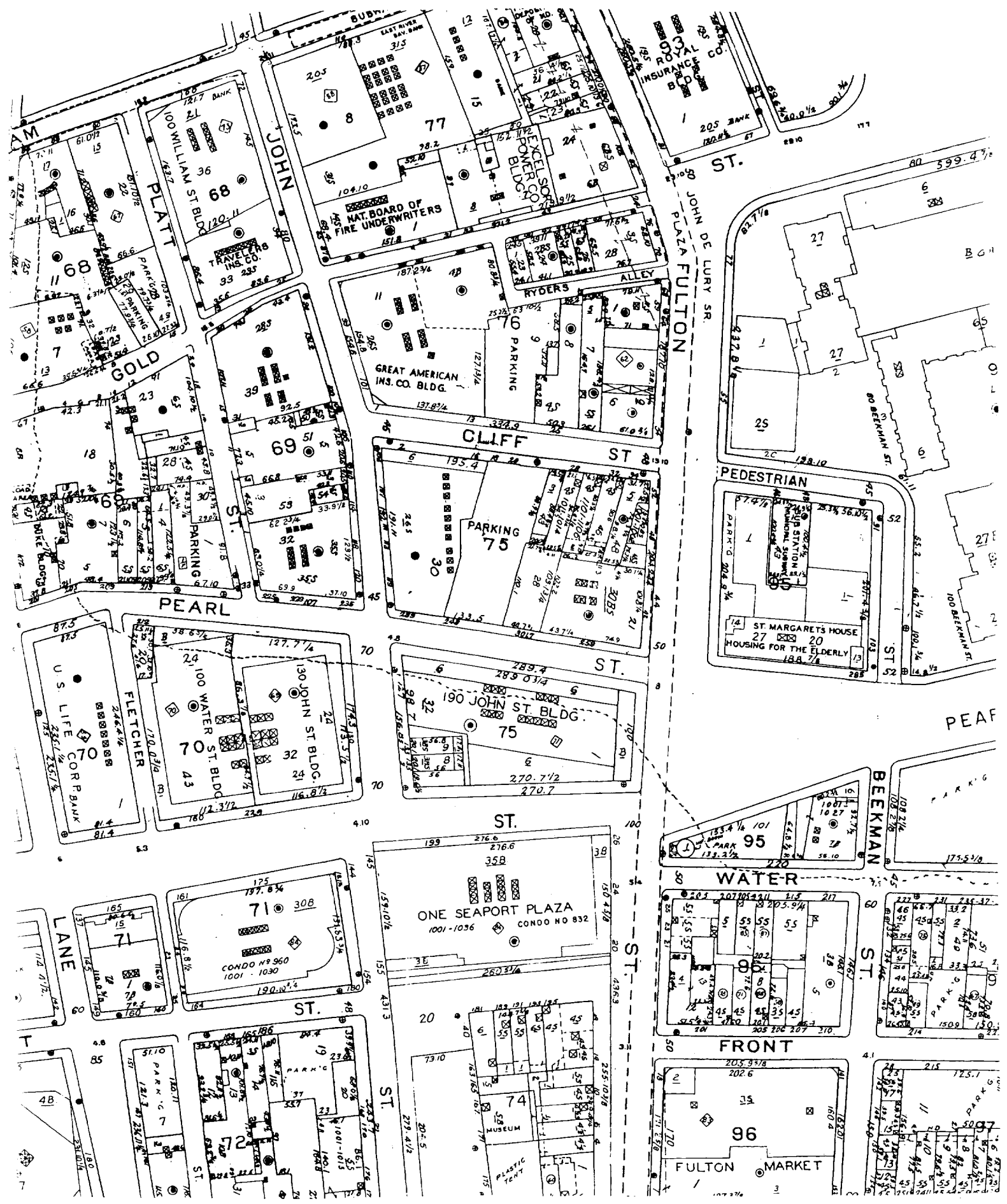
Insurance Company
of North America
Building
New York Co, NY.

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Jersey City Quad

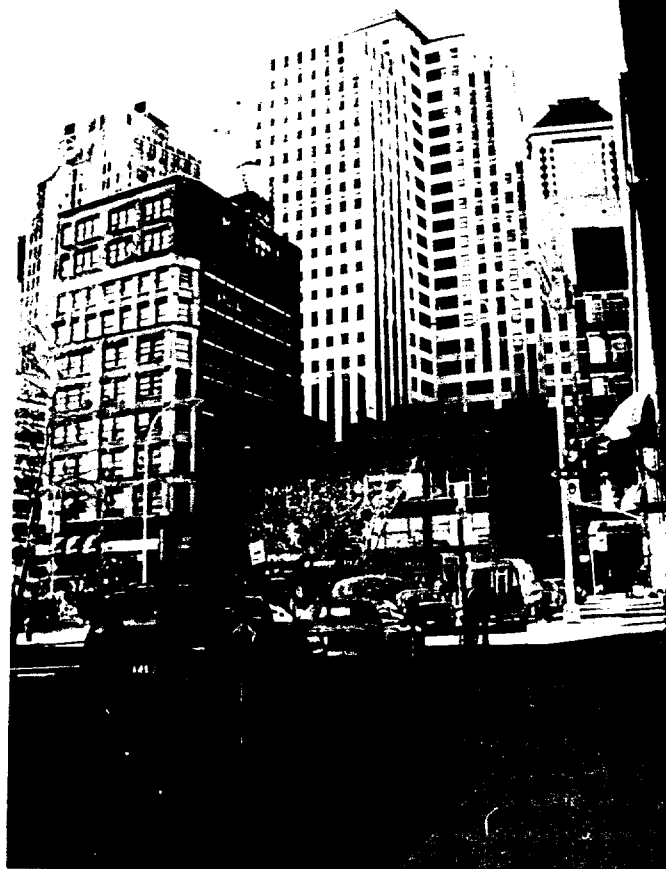
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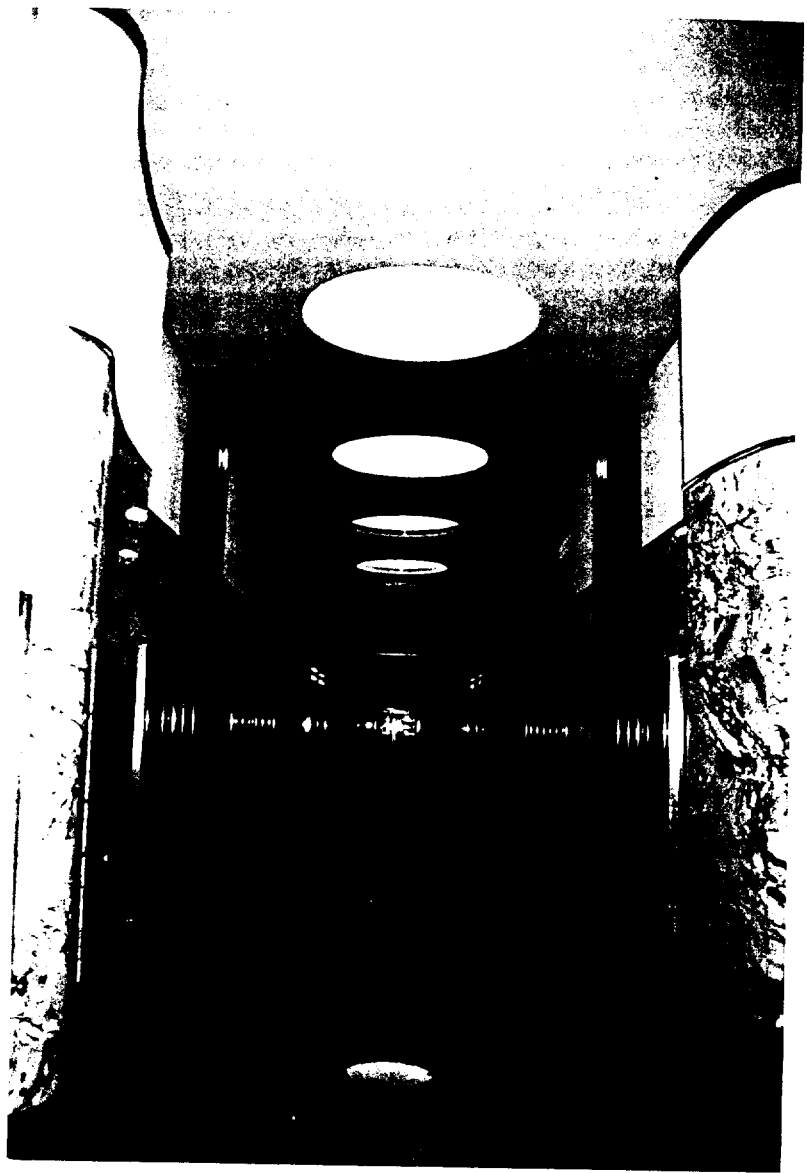
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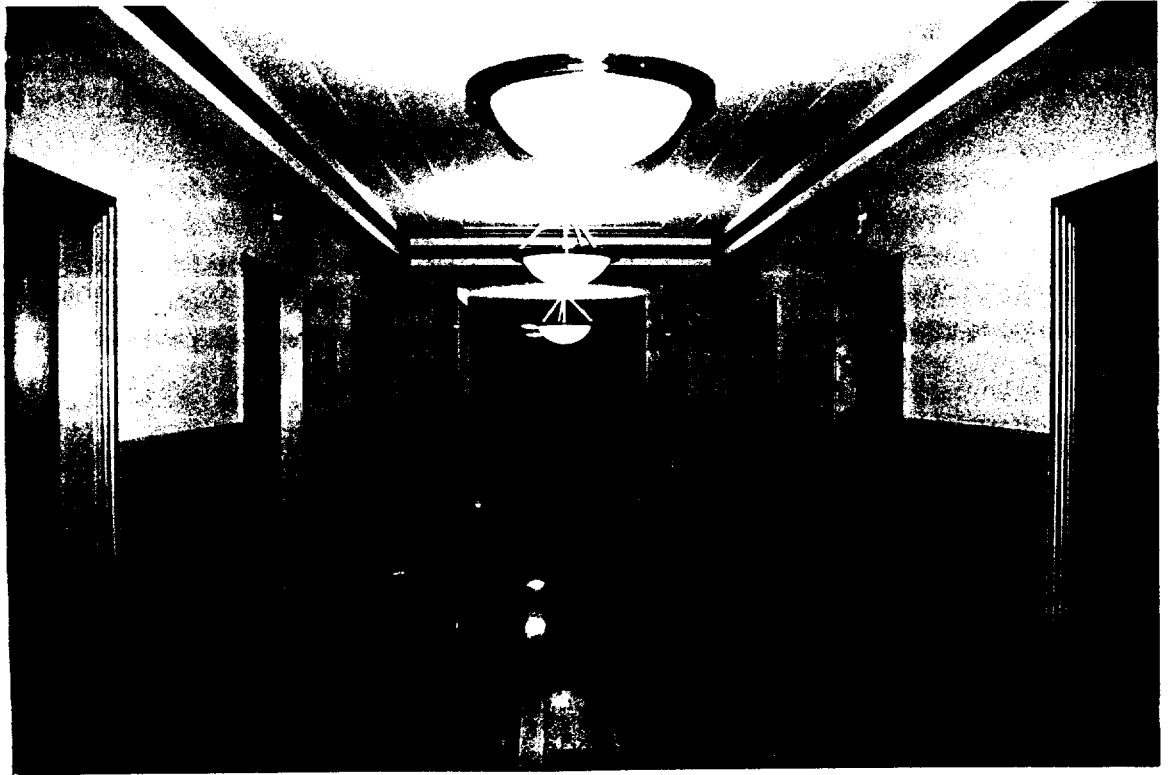
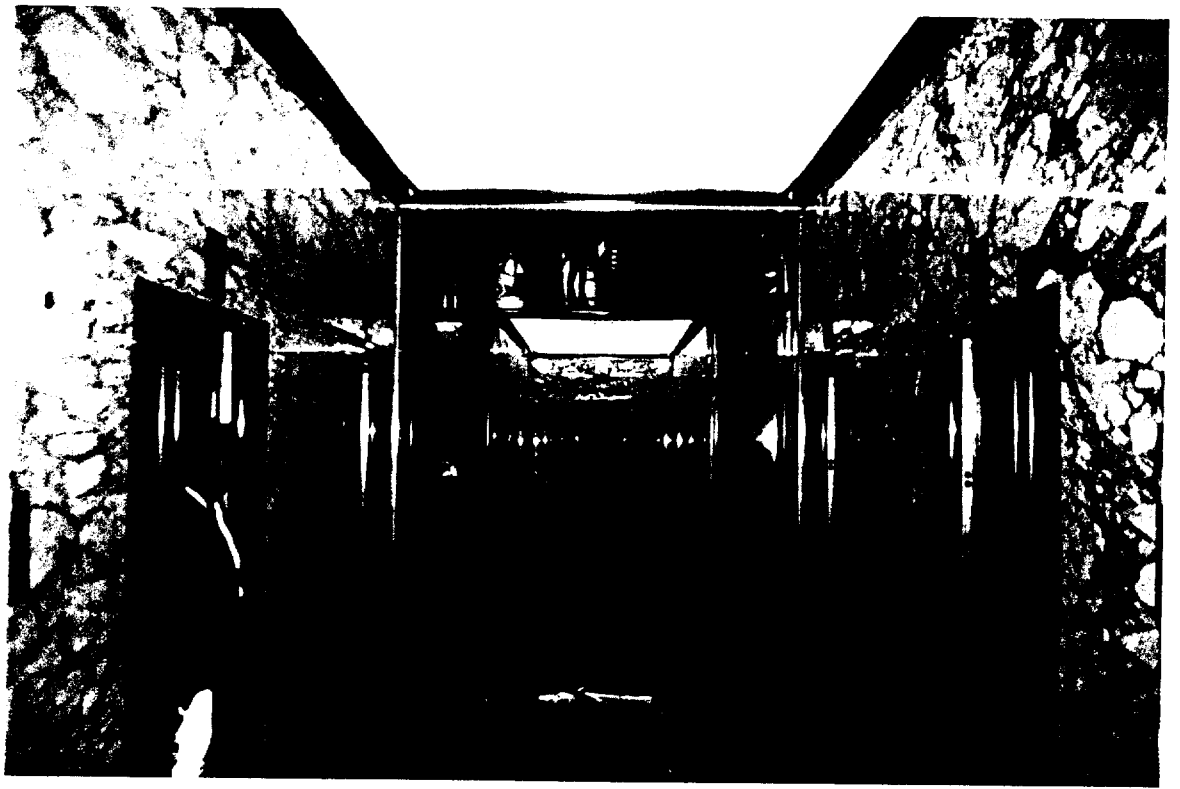


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99 John Street - View at the corner
of John and Cliff Streets
National Register Nomination
Higgins & Quasebarth
July 1999

99 John Street - View south from
Ann Street
National Register Nomination
Higgins & Quasebarth
July 1999



99 John Street - View of upper
floors from John and Cliff Streets
National Register Nomination
Higgins & Quasebarth
July 1999

99 John Street - View west from
Water Street
National Register Nomination
Higgins & Quasebarth
July 1999



99 John Street - 3rd floor elevator
lobby looking east
National Register Nomination
Higgins & Quasebarth
July 1999

99 John Street - 10th floor elevator
lobby looking west
National Register Nomination
Higgins & Quasebarth
July 1999



99 John Street - 10th floor elevator
lobby looking west
National Register Nomination
Higgins & Quasebarth
July 1999

99 John Street - Ground floor
lobby looking north
National Register Nomination
Higgins & Quasebarth
July 1999



99 John Street - Ground floor
lobby looking south
National Register Nomination
Higgins & Quasebarth
July 1999

99 John Street - Ground floor
elevator lobbies looking west
National Register Nomination
Higgins & Quasebarth
July 1999