

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

VLA 6/19/8
NRHP 9/12/8

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 La Crosse Hotel
other names/site number DHR file no. 250-5001-0003

2. Location

street & number 201 Central Avenue not for publication N/A
city or town La Crosse vicinity N/A
state Virginia code VA county Mecklenburg code 117 zip code 23950

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 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] 7/29/08
Signature of certifying official Date
Virginia Department of Historic Resources
State or Federal Agency or Tribal government

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

Signature of commenting official/Title Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby certify that this 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 _____

5. Classification

Ownership of Property (Check as many boxes as apply)

Category of Property (Check only one box)

- private
[X] public-local
public-State
public-Federal

- [X] building(s)
district
site
structure
object

Number of Resources within Property

Table with 2 columns: Contributing, Noncontributing. Rows: buildings (1, 0), sites (0, 0), structures (0, 0), objects (0, 0), Total (1, 0)

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

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

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat: Domestic Sub: Hotel

Current Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat: Work in Progress Sub:

7. Description

Architectural Classification (Enter categories from instructions)

Late 19th and 20th Century Revivals: Colonial Revival

Materials (Enter categories from instructions)

foundation Brick
roof Metal
walls Brick
other

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)

- X 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.
X 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.)

- A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
B removed from its original location.
C a birthplace or a 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 1917-1958

Significant Dates 1917

Significant Person (Complete if Criterion B is marked above) N/A

Cultural Affiliation N/A

Architect/Builder Unknown

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

9. Major Bibliographical References

(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 Buildings Survey #

___ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

La Crosse Hotel

Mecklenburg County, Virginia

Primary Location of Additional Data

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of repository: Virginia Department of Historic Resources

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10. Geographical Data
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Acreage of Property 1.12 acres

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

Zone	Easting	Northing	Zone	Easting	Northing	Zone	Easting	Northing	Zone	Easting	Northing
1	17	759697	4	065047	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.)

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11. Form Prepared By
=====

name/title Kristin Kirchen, Architectural Historian
 organization Virginia Department of Historic Resources date June 2008
 street & number 2801 Kensington Avenue telephone (804) 367-2323
 city or town Richmond state VA zip code 23221

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Additional Documentation
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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)

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Property Owner
=====

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

name Town of La Crosse
 street & number 115 South Main Street telephone (434) 757-7366
 city or town La Crosse state VA zip code 23950

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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.). A federal agency may not conduct or sponsor, and a person is not required to respond to a collection of information unless it displays a valid OMB control number.

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 36 hours per response including the 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 National Register of Historic Places, National Park Service, 1849 C St., NW, Washington, DC 20240.

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**La Crosse Hotel
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Summary Description

The La Crosse Hotel, constructed in 1917, is a two-story brick building with a rear ell and a hipped roof covered with standing seam metal and pressed metal shingles. A full front porch combining Colonial Revival and Craftsman details dominates the front façade. The interior features a foyer lobby and a large communal parlor and dining room with guest rooms located off of double-loaded corridors on the first and second floors. Typical Colonial Revival-inspired interior trim retains its original dark varnished finish and many guest rooms retain colorful linoleum-type floor coverings with floral designs. The hotel faces west across the former Seaboard Air Line Railroad tracks towards the commercial properties on Main Street in the small town of La Crosse. The hotel retains integrity of location, design, setting, materials, feeling, workmanship and association.

Detailed Description

The La Crosse Hotel is located in the small town of La Crosse in Mecklenburg County near the Virginia-North Carolina state line. The two-story brick hotel faces west across the former location of the Seaboard Air Line Railroad tracks towards the Town Office and the commercial buildings on Main Street. Wooden steps built into the hill descend the embankment that formed the railroad bed for the Seaboard Air Line to Central Avenue and a concrete path that leads to the front door of the hotel. Today, the façade of the hotel is almost completely obscured by two large magnolia trees that flank the path. The rest of the lot is flat and open with only minimal foundation plantings around the building. Two medium sized boxwood-type bushes are located at the northwest corner of the front porch, while several other larger bushes and small trees mostly obscure the southwest corner of the porch.

The two-story brick hotel features an L-shaped plan with a double pile, eight-bay front section and a two-story rear wing that is seven bays deep. A cross-hipped roof with patterned metal shingles on the front slope and standing seam metal on the other slopes shelters the building. Eight interior brick chimneys pierce the roof: three are located along the rear (east) wall of the front section, one is located on the back (east) wall of the rear wing, one is located at the intersection of the two portions of the building, one is located on the front (west) elevation, and two are located on the north side elevation of the rear wing. The walls of the hotel are laid in 6:1 common bond. At the roof/wall junction there is a decorative brick cornice made up of a soldier course above a projecting header course above a rowlock course. The basement and first story window openings are capped by brick jack arches and all of the window sills are rusticated cast concrete. All of the windows are double-hung, two-over-two wood sash.

The symmetrical eight-bay front façade is dominated by a projecting central bay and a full width front porch. The central projecting bay is actually two bays wide and projects from the face of the building by about two feet and is capped with a small, cross-hipped roof. The one-story front porch features a shed roof supported by Tuscan half-columns on square brick piers. It stretches the full width of the façade and is completely screened in. The screening is affixed to two-by-fours set behind the columns and piers and abuts what appears to be a non-original plywood ceiling, so it may not be an original feature of the porch. Concrete steps, which replaced wooden ones, are centrally located on the porch and are sheltered by a projecting roof supported by flanking half-columns on piers. The words "LACROSSE HOTEL" are painted in block letters on the frieze of the porch above the steps. The main entrance is actually located to the right (north) of the projecting bay. Large double doors hold large square lights above three horizontal panels. One of the lights has the word "HOTEL" stenciled on it while the other door features a metal plate that says "Office." A three-light transom caps the opening. A single, secondary door accesses the front porch directly from a guest room to the left of the projecting bay. Paired two-over-two windows flank the projecting bay on both the first and second stories, and all second story openings are vertically aligned above a first story opening below.

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The north (side) elevation of the front section is three bays deep with the openings symmetrically arranged and vertically aligned. The windows in the center bay are shorter than the flanking windows.

The rear (east) elevation of the front section of the hotel shows evidence of a former porch or stoop that is now missing. This elevation is five bays wide with the window and door openings symmetrically arranged and vertically aligned. There is a door opening in the far right bay, at the northeast corner of the building, that is about three feet off the ground. There is no obvious evidence in the brickwork of a roofed porch sheltering this entrance so perhaps only a wooden stoop was used to access the door. A one-story porch does exist along the north side elevation of the rear wing. This porch spans the entire depth of the wing from the rear wall to the junction with the front section of the building. It is supported by a solid brick foundation and capped with a hipped, standing seam metal roof. The rear portion of the porch is enclosed with weatherboard siding while the rest of the porch features plain wood posts and is screened in. Steps lead down from a single doorway into the back yard.

The rear wing is relatively narrow at only two bays wide on the rear (east) elevation. A partially below grade entrance leads into the basement, while the first and second stories have two windows apiece.

The south side elevation of the hotel is seven bays deep with seven windows on both the first and second stories.

The main entrance opens into a large lobby/foyer. The front desk is located along the wall to the left of the front door. Three equally sized flattened arches supported by square paneled pilasters with Tuscan capitals march across this wall. Two of the arches are blind while the third provides access to the first floor guest room corridor. The desk is centered on the wall in front of the blind center arch. The curving desk is sheathed in bead board and measures 6'8" wide by 3' high. Opposite the front door is another partially cased archway which leads to the main stair hall. The dog-legged open stringer stair features a heavy turned newel and turned balusters. A small room is located behind the stair and a door on the back wall at the end of the hall leads out onto the screened rear porch. Oral history revealed that this small room behind the stair was, in the 1940's, the location of the only phone in the hotel.

To the right of the front lobby is the primary public space in the hotel. The large parlor is dominated by a massive red brick fireplace on the end wall, and is divided from the lobby area by two full-height Tuscan columns and a paneled casing. The fireplace has a corbelled brick mantle shelf with additional corbelling on the chimney breast above. Four large windows light this room and 10 ½ foot ceilings (present throughout the first floor) give a sense of airy elegance. Swinging double doors on the rear wall (each with six horizontal panels) lead from the parlor into the large dining room. This large space, where the hotel proprietress fed her guests three square meals a day, is also lit by four large windows. An additional doorway on the left wall leads from the dining room into the main stair hall in the front section of the building, while a doorway on the rear wall leads into the rear stair hall and from there into the kitchen.

Both the parlor and dining room have painted wood floors which are mostly covered by an institutional-type brown carpet tacked in the center of each room. A 1 ½ to 2 foot uncarpeted border is left exposed. Both rooms have plaster walls and high, plastered ceilings, simple molded baseboards, and window and door trim consisting of flat casing with plain cap trim, typical for the early 20th century. The parlor windows have scrolled wood valances over the window heads but these do not appear to be an original feature. All of the woodwork is stained dark and has never been painted.

The rear stair hall has a steep, quarter turn stair to the second floor, a small closet under the stair, and a door into the kitchen. The rear stair has a plain, square newel and simple turned balusters. The large kitchen has a center, metal cabinet island and three sinks, two of which are enameled cast iron, one with a built in drainboard, typical for

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the early

20th century. The stove and oven are no longer present. An old clothes washing machine is, however. One door leads from the kitchen to the enclosed portion of the rear porch which obviously functioned as a storage room or pantry, and another door leads out onto the screened portion of the porch.

The guest rooms on the first floor are located in the front section of the building through the arched opening beside the front desk. Six rooms are located off a double-loaded corridor with a half bath located at the end of the hall. The rooms are very similar in size, design, and ornamentation, averaging 10' by 11' with some small variations. Most rooms still have small sinks in them, while one has a private full bath. All rooms have at least one window, with some rooms having as many as three. Room 3, at the end of the hall on the front of the building, has a private entrance off the front porch. Room 6, at the end of the hall on the rear of the building, has a private entrance off of the now missing rear porch or stoop. All of the rooms have painted wood floors with evidence of missing floor coverings in the center of each (the flooring in the center is unpainted). All of the rooms are accessed from the corridor by six paneled doors with single-light transoms above, and all have the same trim found in the public spaces of the hotel. Most of the metal room numbers still survive on the doors. The two rooms at the end of the hall on the front of the building have been connected with a more recent doorway in the partition wall, but this is the only instance of non-original openings being added. These two rooms are also fully carpeted with green shag carpeting and currently hold some of the surviving original furniture, including a wooden dresser and two metal bed frames.

Upstairs, eight guest rooms are located off a double-loaded corridor in the front section of the building, while four more are located off a single-loaded corridor in the rear wing. One full hall bath is located in the front hall and another is located at the end of the rear hall. The upstairs rooms are the same as the downstairs rooms with more variation in size – some of the upstairs rooms are quite large. A couple rooms also have later drop ceilings and shower stalls added or evidence that they have been added and since removed. The most exciting difference between the upstairs and downstairs rooms is that many of the upstairs rooms have surviving linoleum type floor coverings in the center of the rooms. Each covering has a different, colorful floral pattern; these “art-rugs” were popular between 1900 and 1950. The rear-most three rooms in the rear hall are all connected with original doorways and transoms in the partition walls, as well as private access from the corridor. Two of these rooms have closets and are the only rooms that do. Oral history revealed that the second owner, Belle Willis, lived in the hotel with her family for a time, and it seems likely that they would have lived in this apartment. When the owner and her family were not in residence, this apartment probably would have been rented to some of the hotel’s long-term tenants.

The hotel has no proper basement, but a door beneath the main stair leads to a steep stair down to a dirt-floored mechanical area.

There are no secondary resources associated with the hotel today, although oral history reveals that a large vegetable garden and chicken coop used to stand behind the hotel and provided much of the food served.

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Significance Statement

The La Crosse Hotel in La Crosse, Virginia is eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A, in the area of Commerce, and Criterion C in the area of Architecture. It is locally significant as an outstanding example of an early 20th century small town railroad hotel with excellent integrity. The two-story brick hotel occupies a prominent position across the tracks from the former location of the Seaboard Air Line depot and the main commercial strip in La Crosse, and for nearly half a century it drew travelers and locals alike to its communal dining table. Under the guidance and management of three respected business women, the hotel flourished at the center of town. Today it serves as a representative example of many of the defining characteristics of the American hotel industry. The period of significance is from the date of construction, 1917, through 1958, for the central role that it played in the community.

Acknowledgments

The author of this nomination is indebted to the fine memories and record keeping of some of La Crosse's residents. Mr. Lewis R. Rash, Jr., Mr. Hugh Kirkland, and Mr. James Cook all provided invaluable information about day-to-day life in La Crosse in the first half of the 20th century and about the history and function of the La Crosse Hotel.

Property History

The La Crosse Hotel was built in 1917 by John H. Coulter. Originally from Tennessee, Mr. Coulter was trained as a bridge engineer but was also involved in real estate and other businesses in La Crosse. His wife ran the hotel until 1926 when the couple moved to Pennsylvania and Mrs. Belle Willis took over operation of the hotel. Mrs. Willis purchased the hotel with two partners, Effie S. Perkinson and Hunter W. Smelley, on January 26, 1926. All furnishings, except for a piano and one table, were included in the transaction. Mrs. Willis ran the hotel for more than 25 years. In 1953, it was purchased by John Byron Rockwell and his wife, Ruth Rockwell, from the estate of Mrs. Willis. Once again, all of the furnishings conveyed. The Rockwells continued to operate the hotel. After Mr. Rockwell died in 1979, Ruth shifted the operation to cater solely to boarders rather than overnight guests, and hosted lunches, receptions and other social events at the former hotel. Ruth Rockwell continued to take in boarders until shortly before her death in 2001. The Town of La Crosse purchased the hotel in December 2003 and is in the process of rehabilitating the building for use as a visitor center along the proposed Tobacco Heritage Trail which follows the path of the former Norfolk, Franklin, and Danville Railroad through town.¹

Significance in the area of Commerce

Hotels in America

The concept of the hotel has its American roots in the taverns of the 17th and 18th centuries. The terms tavern, inn, ordinary, and public house were all used interchangeably in the 18th century to refer to establishments that sold alcoholic drinks and rented lodging to travelers.² Often these were simply private homes located along major transportation routes whose owners were willing to share their space with overnight travelers. The term "hotel" entered the English language in the 1760's and was used to signify a guest house of a particularly high quality.³ By 1776 the term had migrated to America, although it tended to refer to a function rather than a specific building type during most of the 18th century.⁴

The first purpose-built hotel in America was the Union Public Hotel in Washington D.C. which was built in 1793. Although this hotel was financially a failure, it was followed quickly by others that were more successful – the City

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Hotel in New York City was built in 1794. The first wave of hotel building, between 1793 and 1810, can be seen as part of a broader effort to improve transportation and encourage trade. The hotel entrepreneurs recognized that increased commerce and trade meant more businessmen traveling away from home who would need a place to stay. These early hotels were usually large, architecturally ambitious buildings, often the most visually prominent buildings in their city, and they are best understood as statements about the importance of promoting trade and capitalism.⁵

The second wave of hotel construction in the 1820's and 1830's was marked by an increased democratization of the industry. While the reality is that hotels still catered to a relatively small proportion of the American population, they were no longer seen solely as the playgrounds of the elite. This effort to appeal to a broader populace while still maintaining an elite facade probably contributed to the larger number of successful hotels built during this period. It was also during this period that hotels became a "reproducible, institutional type" easily adapted to a variety of places.⁶

By the middle of the 19th century, hotels had become "fundamentally translocal institutions," nodes in an extended network of travel and commerce.⁷ They continued to be built in increasing numbers and identifiable types began to emerge – luxury, middle class, marginal, resort, railroad, and settlement. By the early 1870s, national hotel guides were available to the traveling public. When combined with the available national railway guides, these publications made it possible for people to plan a trip anywhere in the United States. As a region, the South lagged behind the Northeast and Midwest in number of hotels per capita, but, on the whole, by 1876 the American network of transportation and accommodation was the most extensive, elaborate, and refined in the world.⁸ In the hotel industry, the turn of the 20th century saw a trend towards targeting a broader customer base and standardization in the construction of hotel buildings.⁹ The double-loaded corridor, for example, was a typical floor plan for hotels by the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Hotels in La Crosse

In 1889, the Atlantic and Danville Railroad, later known as the Southern Railroad and, after 1962, as the Norfolk, Franklin, and Danville Railroad, was constructed through a small village known as Piney Pond. The settlement was soon renamed La Crosse and the La Crosse Post Office was established May 26, 1890. In 1900, the Seaboard Air Line laid tracks to cross the A&D in the village. The first Seaboard Air Line train passed through town on May 30, 1900. The Town of La Crosse was incorporated in 1901 and thrived at the junction of two of these major transportation routes for more than half a century.

In the decades before the automobile became a common fixture in every garage across the country, the railroad served a vital function transporting raw materials, finished goods, and passengers from point A to point B. The railroad was used by both long distance travelers going hundreds of miles and local travelers hopping on the train for just a few miles to a neighboring town for shopping or visiting. Because of the intersection of the Atlantic and Danville (later the Norfolk, Franklin and Danville Railway) and the Seaboard Air Line (later CSX), a traveler could go north, south, east or west by train from La Crosse; up to eight passenger trains a day stopped in town. A May 11, 1891 schedule for the Atlantic and Danville Railway shows two passenger trains stopping in La Crosse heading westward and two heading east every day except Sunday, when only one passed through going each direction. On the Seaboard Air Line, four passenger trains stopped every day at the La Crosse station and many people switched trains there. Often times, switching trains required an overnight stay.

The first hotel in La Crosse was located on the site of the present hotel and, although the exact construction date is unknown, it is assumed to have been built around 1900, since by that time, there were passenger trains stopping in La Crosse. The second hotel was built sometime in the early 20th century about a block away from the first hotel, at

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the corner of what is now College Street and Main Street. An old photograph of the frame hotel shows a long porch across the College Street side with rooms above; a store located on the first floor sold groceries and dry goods.¹⁰ By the late 1910s or early '20s, Mrs. Belle Willis had taken over operation of the second hotel and it became known as the Willis Hotel.

Mr. John Coulter bought the first hotel property in 1917 and replaced the old frame building with a new brick hotel. An advertisement that appeared in the Mecklenburg Circuit News in July 1923 identifies Mrs. J.H. Coulter as the Proprietress of the "Hotel La Crosse" a "New Brick Hotel" offering "Appointments First-Class." According to the advertisement, the hotel "Caters to the traveling public...Good Rooms. Comfortable Beds, Modern and Sanitary. Hot and Cold Running Water. Clean Table Linen. Good Food – Well Cooked. Our service will bring you back. Have your mail addressed Care of Hotel La Crosse."¹¹ Mr. and Mrs. Coulter operated the hotel for almost 10 years before they moved north and sold the operation to Mrs. Willis, owner of the Willis Hotel up the street, and two partners, in January 1926. The diary of Mr. L.R. Rash (father of Mr. Lewis R. Rash interviewed for this nomination) indicates that Mrs. Willis moved to the La Crosse Hotel on September 7, 1926. Three months later, in December 1926, the old frame Willis Hotel burned down leaving the La Crosse Hotel as the only hotel in town.

Under Mrs. Willis (or Miss Belle as the locals called her), the La Crosse Hotel was a well-respected and venerable institution. As it had under the Coulters, the hotel continued to cater to the "traveling public," which consisted in large part of traveling salesmen, but also included railroad officials inspecting the railroad and some officials of the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s.¹² During her ownership, Mrs. Willis served three square meals a day in the large dining room and the hotel was renowned for its food until it closed in 2001. It was typical throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries for hotels to serve meals to their guests and for the price of those meals to be included in the accommodation rate; this sort of arrangement was called the "American Plan."¹³ The large brass bell that Mrs. Willis used to call her guests to the table now rests silently in the Town vault, but town residents recall her standing in the front yard ringing the bell vigorously to announce mealtimes.¹⁴

Mrs. Willis also rented rooms to more long-term guests. Several local teachers boarded at the hotel in the 1930s and '40s, a railroad signalman and his family also lived there, as did Mrs. Willis, her husband and two daughters for a time. Mr. and Mrs. Matthew M. Rainey and their young daughter lived in a second-floor room from 1937 to 1944 and took their meals at the hotel; Mr. Rainey was a local agent for the Southern Railroad.¹⁵ Local residents recall that the more permanent residents had rooms upstairs while the downstairs rooms were offered to overnight guests; some of the permanent residents, particularly the families, had more than one room. The use of the hotel as a place of permanent residence by long-term boarders was not unique; indeed, by the late 19th century, most urban hotels housed a substantial number of boarders.¹⁶ For hotel proprietors, these types of guests offered the guarantee of regular cash flow and were therefore highly desirable in the guest-dependent industry. Research has shown that the cost of city living was one factor in people's choice to give up housekeeping and live in a hotel in the mid-19th century.¹⁷ Often women, more than their husbands, championed the move to a hotel because it freed them from the arduous housework of the 19th century.¹⁸ In La Crosse, the decision may have been based more on convenience rather than cost; for single teachers and railroad agents it was simply more practical to rent a room at the hotel in town where meals would be provided. The financial difficulties of the Depression may, however, have played a role in some people's decisions. Regardless of the motivation, by the 1930s living in a hotel was an acceptable practice.

The hotel's guest register for 1949, the oldest register located to date, reveals some interesting trends about hotel guests.¹⁹ Most of the guests were from Virginia, many from the bigger cities of Richmond and Petersburg, others from smaller towns even closer to La Crosse. But guests from more far-flung locales, including New York, Philadelphia, and Boston, signed their names as well. There are also many names that show up repeatedly indicating that recurring guests were an important client base. Locals report that many of the salesmen planned their

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routes

around an overnight stay at the La Crosse Hotel, staying there on the same night every other week or so; for some reason, they report, the hotel was always crowded on Monday nights.²⁰ The large front parlor was always a popular spot for both locals and travelers to socialize and play bridge.²¹

Since the early 19th century, hotel lobbies had been acknowledged as public spaces and lobbies, dining rooms, and bars were popular gathering places for locals as well as guests throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries; as a result, researcher Sandoval-Strausz characterizes the hotel as a place of “social possibilities.”²² He sees the hotel as an important link between small communities and the national urban system; they allowed the local population to interact with travelers and strangers.²³ The hotel-railroad network served to draw communities, which may have been small and otherwise isolated, into larger regional networks; every hotel could be seen as the center of a “travel hinterland” – an extended geographic area from which it drew people in and put them into direct personal contact.²⁴ The La Crosse hotel served as the nexus of a regional community connected by the railroad, where locals and travelers shared meals and exchanged news and daily gossip.

The most famous guest to stay at the La Crosse Hotel was Sarah Ophelia Colley, the comedian and actress whose stage name was Minnie Pearl. During the mid to late 1930s, after attending Ward-Belmont College as a theatre major, Miss Colley was employed by the Wayne P. Sewell Production Company out of Atlanta which produced and directed dramatic performances for schools and local organizations in small towns across the South. In that capacity, she came to La Crosse six times to direct the senior play at La Crosse High School and stayed at the La Crosse Hotel during at least several of these visits. Miss Colley used her time on the road and the resulting exposure to a multitude of small town southerners to develop her Minnie Pearl character and, in 1940, she joined the Grand Ole Opry cast where she entertained generations of southerners as Miss Pearl. She is widely recognized as country music’s preeminent comedian and was a fixture on the television show Hee Haw in the 1960s and ‘70s.²⁵

Today, Main Street in La Crosse is a quiet place that belies the bustling activity that characterized the town during the period of significance. Traffic on the railroads was steady and constant and although only two passenger trains a day stopped in La Crosse, many more passed through without stopping. The row of commercial buildings that faces the hotel from the opposite side of the Seaboard/CSX tracks includes the Bank of La Crosse which always did a steady business. Unlike many banks in Mecklenburg and Brunswick Counties, it stayed open during the Depression, merged with the Bank of Virginia in 1967, and did not close until August 1993.²⁶ During the second quarter of the 20th century, the storefronts flanking the bank included grocery stores selling live chickens and fresh fish, farm supply stores, general merchandise stores, dry goods stores, a barber shop, and a drug store. The local doctor ran the drug store and saw patients in an office in the back of the store.²⁷

By the 1940s, roads ran to more places than train tracks, and passenger trains were no longer the dominant means of long-distance travel.²⁸ The Southern Railroad ceased passenger service between Norfolk and Danville in 1949, and the Seaboard Air Line (later Seaboard Coast Line) stopped passenger service through town in the 1960s.²⁹ Because La Crosse was only a couple of miles south of US Route 1, the La Crosse Hotel remained convenient to the traveling salesmen who, by the late 1940s, had switched to the automobile for their transportation, and the hotel stayed in business long after the passenger trains ceased.

For more than half a century, the hotel was, both literally and figuratively, at the center of town. Its central location, combined with the renowned good food served by Miss Belle and Mrs. Rockwell, made the hotel an important gathering place and community center. The combination of long-term residents and nightly guests, the communal meals provided, and the social opportunities offered all connect the La Crosse Hotel to broader trends in the American hotel tradition.

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Women and African-Americans and the Hotel La Crosse

Mr. Sandoval-Strausz’s research on American hotels suggests that most “front of the house” hotel workers (managers, clerks, hotel keepers) were white males in the 19th century. Usually, if women worked in the hotels at all, it was as cooks, laundresses or maids.³⁰ Throughout the 19th century, women’s place was firmly in the home. The pop-culture ideology of “separate spheres,” which consigned the woman to the home and domestic labor as a delicate angel providing comfort and succor to her family while her husband braved the capitalistic dangers of the working world outside the home, rose to prominence during the mid to late 19th century and carried over into the early 20th century as well. It is interesting to note that, during the late 19th century, middle class social commentators (men, generally) looked at the trend of hotel living as endangering this ideology and the supporting “cult of domesticity.” Relieving women of their household responsibilities was a threat to the domestic ideals and gendered roles that the society had created and espoused.³¹ In the early 20th century, however, the idea of women working outside of the home was becoming more acceptable. Recent research has actually suggested that most keepers of boardinghouses in the mid to late 19th century were women,³² so the transition from boardinghouse landlady to hotelkeeper may not have been too difficult a transition. Moreover, since the purpose of hotels was to provide hospitality and comfort, tasks that women had been doing for their families for generations, perhaps women hotelkeepers were seen as simply extending their domestic role outside the nuclear family. However it was justified by the social consciousness, more women were taking management roles in hotels by the early to mid-20th century and Mrs. Coulter, Mrs. Willis, and Mrs. Rockwell were part of an evolving tradition of hospitality.

African-American women’s contributions to the La Crosse Hotel should not go unmentioned. Each proprietress of the Hotel relied on a staff of African-American women to help cook and clean for the guests. Mag Walker, Mary Thomas, Cora Boyd, and Lucille Smith were all women of color who labored behind the scenes to provide the clean accommodations and “good food – well cooked” advertised by the hotel.³³ While they were relied on for their “back of the house” contributions, African-Americans were not welcome guests at the hotel during the period of significance. In this regard, the La Crosse Hotel was typical for hotels across the south during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Jim Crow laws and a doctrine of separate but equal strove to keep black and white facilities of all types segregated. Hotels were a battleground during the Civil Rights movement and the struggle to integrate hotels is a microcosm of the difficulties associated with integration in the South as a whole.³⁴

Architectural Significance

As the rail lines spread across the country, small towns and villages that had not previously been travel destinations or located along major transportation routes were suddenly transformed into waysides and stopovers where both goods and passengers were loaded or disembarked. In the case of La Crosse, the name of the town is directly derived from its location on the railroad and, while a small village existed in the area prior to the arrival of the railroad, the development of the town proper, with a main street, a bank, and a variety of shops, can be tied directly to the arrival of the trains. Moreover, in La Crosse as in other small towns across the country, there was suddenly a need for reputable overnight accommodations and dining establishments close to the railroad station. More functional than ornamental, small town railroad hotels were more closely related to the taverns and small inns of the 18th and early 19th centuries than they were to the luxury hotels of the mid to late 19th century. Their audience was the population that traveled with a purpose, and, although the railroad hotel proprietors advertised their clean accommodations and good food, they rarely put on airs or made any pretensions about luxury.

In the early to mid-20th century there must have been multiple railroad hotels similar to the Hotel La Crosse in scale, decoration, and purpose in small towns across Virginia. However, none of them have been individually listed on the

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National Register or Virginia Landmarks Register and only two surviving examples have been surveyed to date.³⁵

The Hotel Charlotte in Keysville in Charlotte County (c. 1907) is a two-story frame building with Victorian details that is located beside the Norfolk and Southern railroad tracks and former depot in the small town of Keysville. Like the La Crosse Hotel, the Hotel Charlotte was an important gathering place for the community. The Hotel Crewe in Crewe in Nottoway County (1927) is a three-story brick building with minimal Colonial Revival exterior decoration located a few blocks from the Norfolk and Southern railroad tracks in downtown Crewe. Like the La Crosse Hotel, the Hotel Crewe is said to have provided accommodations to railroad workers.

Aside from the clearly luxury hotels in Virginia’s larger cities, like the Jefferson Hotel in Richmond and the Hotel Roanoke in Roanoke, the other hotels listed on the Registers are located in small cities in urban settings, are larger in size, and exhibit grander architectural designs in their attempts to bring a cosmopolitan feeling to their respective locales – examples include the Hotel Norton in Norton (c.1920), the Hotel Lincoln in Marion (c. 1927), and the Inn at Wise in Wise (1910). In contrast, the architecture of the La Crosse Hotel is more reminiscent of typical middle class rural houses than big city hotels. The two story height, hipped roof, L-plan, and full front porch are all details typical of residential architecture. Inside, the decorative details borrow from the Arts and Crafts and Colonial Revival styles, but are minimal and typical for the period’s residential architecture. The communal dining room and parlor, the concept of which was firmly entrenched in American hotel history, serve to reinforce the idea that the hotel was the traveler’s home away from home. Unlike hotels catering to leisure travelers which strove through their architecture and ambiance to create an atmosphere of “away,” some small-town railroad hotels that catered to people who had to be on the road, like the La Crosse Hotel, may have intentionally striven to evoke the feeling of the typical middle class home that their guests had left behind.

The La Crosse Hotel has excellent integrity to the period of significance and is an instructive example of an early 20th century small-town railroad hotel. In addition to serving as a useful indication that not every hotel aimed for the luxury of the Jefferson, the La Crosse Hotel is a tangible reminder of a period in Mecklenburg’s past when the railroad was king and the heart of the community centered around Main Street and Miss Belle’s dining room.

Endnotes

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- ¹ This paragraph is s summary of information provided by Mr. James Cook in a document titled “History of the Hotels in La Crosse,” October 17, 2007. On file at the town office and at the Department of Historic Resources.
 - ² A.K. Sandoval-Strausz, *Hotel: An American History* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2007), 16.
 - ³ Sandoval-Strausz, 6.
 - ⁴ Sandoval-Strausz, 6.
 - ⁵ This paragraph summarizes the information found on pages 21-31 in Sandoval-Strausz.
 - ⁶ Sandoval-Strausz, 72.
 - ⁷ Sandoval-Strausz, 76.
 - ⁸ Sandoval-Strausz, 108.
 - ⁹ Sandoval-Strausz, 127.
 - ¹⁰ James B. Cook, “History of the Hotels in La Crosse” (October 17, 2007). On file at the La Crosse Town Office and the Department of Historic Resources file no. 250-5001-0003.
 - ¹¹ *Mecklenburg Circuit News*, La Crosse, Virginia, July 1923. Copy of the advertisement provided to the author by Mr. Ryland Rash. Copy on file at DHR.
 - ¹² Oral interview with Mr. Ryland Rash and Mr. Hugh Kirkland. The CCC was considering establishing a camp nearby.
 - ¹³ Sandoval-Strausz, 168.
 - ¹⁴ Personal communication, James Cook, February 26, 2008.
 - ¹⁵ Personal communication, James Cook, February 26, 2008.
 - ¹⁶ Sandoval-Strausz, 268.

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- ¹⁷ Sandoval-Strausz, 269.
¹⁸ Sandoval-Strausz, 269.
¹⁹ The 1949 hotel register and some later registers are housed in the vault in the La Crosse Town Office.
²⁰ Interview with Rash and Kirkland, January 31, 2008.
²¹ Personal communication, James Cook, February 26, 2008.
²² Sandoval-Strausz, 175.
²³ Sandoval-Strausz, 235.
²⁴ Sandoval-Strausz, 235.
²⁵ Country Music Television, Biography of Minnie Pearl. http://www.cmt.com/artists/az/pearl_minnie/bio.jhtml. Information about Ms. Colley's stay in La Crosse from interview with Rash and Kirkland, January 31, 2008.
²⁶ Personal communication, Cook and Rash, February 26, 2008.
²⁷ Information about La Crosse in the 1930s and '40s in this paragraph from interview with Rash and Kirkland, January 31, 2008.
²⁸ Sandoval-Strausz, 134.
²⁹ Personal communication, Cook, February 26, 2008.
³⁰ Sandoval-Strausz, 180.
³¹ Sandoval-Strausz, 272.
³² See Wendy Gamber. *The Boardinghouse in Nineteenth Century America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007.
³³ Interview with Rash and Kirkland, January 31, 2008.
³⁴ Sandoval-Strausz, 284.
³⁵ This information is based on a careful search of DHR's Data Sharing System for every resource with "hotel" in the resource name and every resource recorded as "hotel" in the WUZIT category.

Section 9: Major Bibliographical References

Cook, James B. "History of the Hotels in La Crosse" (October 17, 2007). On file at the La Crosse Town Office and the Department of Historic Resources file no. 250-5001-0003.

Mecklenburg Circuit News, La Crosse, Virginia, July 1923. Copy of a hotel advertisement provided to the author by Mr. Ryland Rash. Copy on file at DHR.

Sandoval-Strausz, A.K. *Hotel: An American History*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2007.

Section 10: Geographical Data

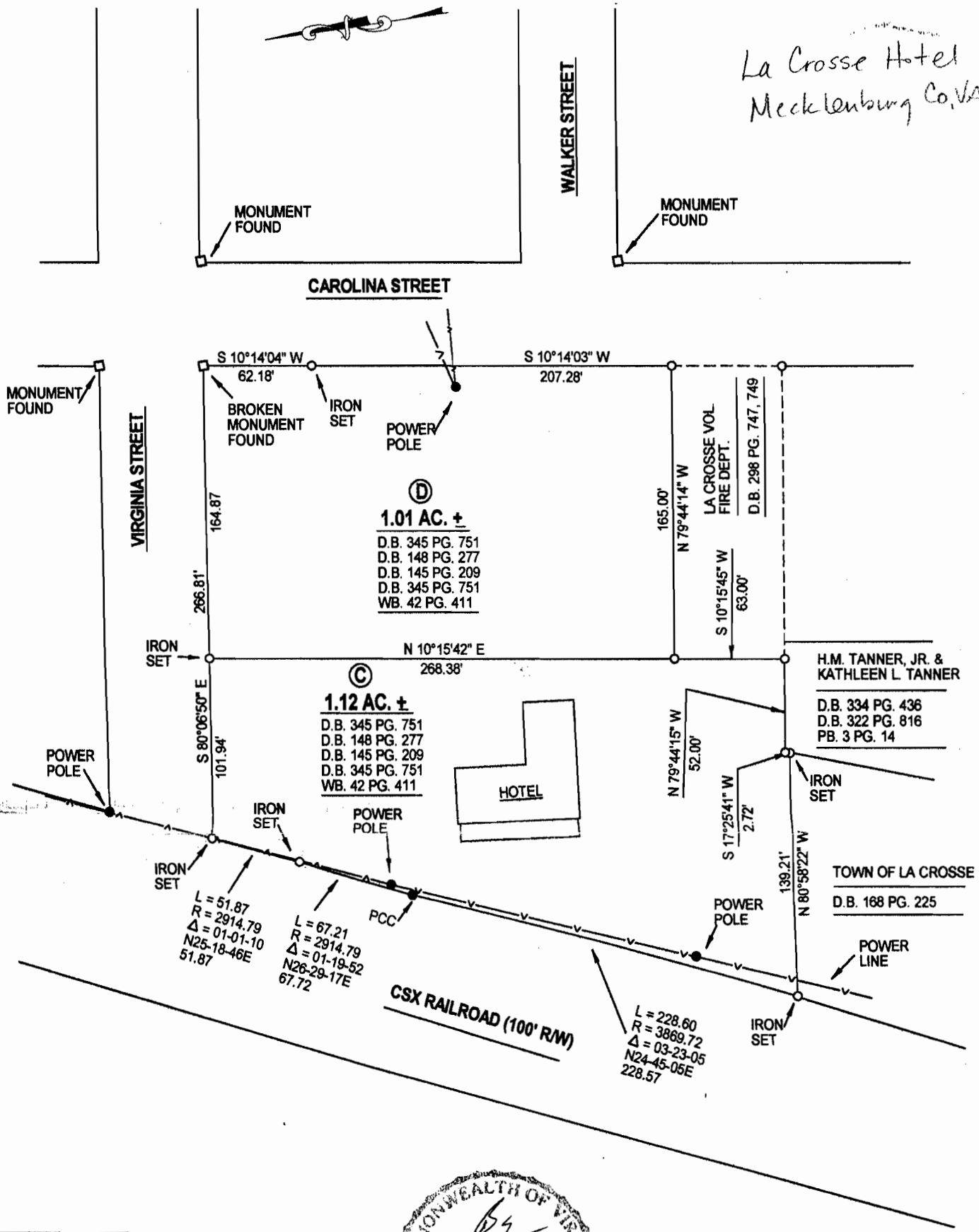
Verbal Boundary Description

Boundaries of the La Crosse Hotel property are shown on the attached plat map marked as Lot C as surveyed by Benjamin M. Evans, Jr., Inc. in 2001 and revised in 2003 at a scale of 1" = 60'.

Boundary Justification

These boundaries encompass all of the original portions of the Hotel property currently under the Town's ownership.

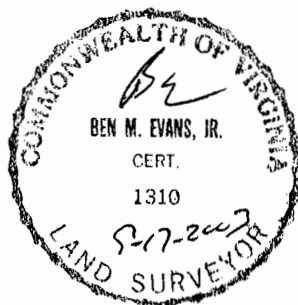
La Crosse Hotel
Mecklenburg Co., VA.



WYLIE H. FARRAR
H. WATKINS NEWMAN

BEING PARCELS "A" & "B"
ON PLAT IN INST. #020001689
(RE-DIVIDED)

TOWN OF LA CROSSE
MECKLENBURG CO., VA.



THIS SURVEY HAS BEEN PREPARED WITHOUT THE BENEFIT
OF A TITLE REPORT AND DOES NOT THEREFORE NECES-
SARILY INDICATE ALL ENCUMBRANCES ON THE PROPERTY

I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS BOUNDARY
SURVEY TO THE BEST OF MY KNOWLEDGE
AND BELIEF IS CORRECT AND COMPLIES
WITH THE MINIMUM STANDARDS AND
PROCEDURES AS ESTABLISHED BY THE
VA STATE BOARD OF ARCHITECTS,
PROFESSIONAL ENGINEERS, LAND
SURVEYORS AND CERTIFIED LANDSCAPE
ARCHITECTS

BENJAMIN M. EVANS JR., INC.
PROFESSIONAL ENGINEER-LAND SURVEYOR
SOUTH HILL, VA. 23970

DATE	SCALE	FILE
05 FEBRUARY, 2001 REV: 17 SEPTEMBER, 2003	1" = 60'	199 - 01 - 55 - M



La Crosse Hotel
Mecklenburg Co, VA
250-5001-0003
UTM ZONE 17
759697E
4065047N
La Crosse Quad

HENDERSON, N. C. 30 MI. 5357 II NW
6 MI. TO VA. 637 (SOUTH HILL)