

Teton County Historic Site Survey

1. Name of Property

historic name Benson Building

other name/site number Jackson Hole Light and Power, Buffalo Trail Galleries

2. Location

street & number 98 Center ☐ not for publication

city or town Jackson ☐ vicinity

state Wyoming code WY county Teton code 039 zip code 830

3. Ownership of Property

(check as many boxes as apply)

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

4. Category of Property

(check only one box)

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

5. Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>1</u>		buildings
		sites
		structures
		objects
<u>1</u>		Total

Property Owner

name/title SSDA, LLC

street & number PO Box 3393 telephone

city or town Jackson state WY zip code 83001

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

National Register Status:

- ☐ Eligible ☐ Unevaluated
☒ Not Eligible ☐ District Potential

6. Function or Use**Historic Function**

(Enter categories from instructions)

Commerce / Trade: Business

Current Function

(Enter categories from instructions)

Commerce / Trade: Specialty Store

7. Description**Architectural Classification**

(Enter categories from instructions)

Other: Commercial vernacular

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation concrete

walls wood

roof asphalt

other _____

Narrative Description

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

☒ See continuation sheet(s) for Section No. 7

8. Description**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.

Narrative Statement of Significance

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

Areas of Significance

Commerce

Social History

Period of Significance

1923 - 1953

Significant Dates**Significant Persons**

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

Cultural Affiliation**Architect/Builder**

☒ See continuation sheet(s) for Section No. 8

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 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:

Teton County Historical Society

☒ See continuation sheet(s) for Section No. 9

10. Geographical DataAcreage of Property less than one acres**UTM References**

(Place additional boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

1 1/2 5/1/9/3/3/1 4/8/1/4/1/7/7
Zone Easting Northing2 1/2 / / / / / / / / / /
Zone Easting Northing3 1/2 / / / / / / / / / /
Zone Easting Northing4 1/2 / / / / / / / / / /
Zone Easting Northing**Verbal Boundary Description**

(Describe the boundaries of the property.)

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

☐ See continuation sheet(s) for Section No. 10**11. Form Prepared By**

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Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Continuation Sheets**
- **Maps**
- **Photographs:** Representative photographs of the property.

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Benson Building

Narrative Description

Originally known as Jackson Hole Light & Power Company, this building was also called the Benson Building for the owner and founder of the local power company, Ed Benson. Located next to and joining one of the oldest buildings in the community—the Clubhouse—the Benson Building is a two-story frame building that faces the northeast corner of the town square to the west across Center Street. While the building has been much altered in the years since the power company sold its operation to the local electric cooperative, its external features are still recognizable.

The original building, constructed in 1923, was a two-story frame building with a store front on the west elevation of the ground floor and three double-hung windows above on the second story. The ground level storefront consisted of (1) a recessed doorway on the north extreme of the elevation, (2) two fixed light windows beneath three clerestories forming a display window, and (3) a wooden service door that opened into a stairway leading to the second floor. The southern-most of the upstairs windows, smaller than the two to the north, opened onto the stairway. At some point, an electric sign with two panels, one above the other, carried the name of the firm: JACKSON HOLE LIGHT & POWER CO and the two panels were joined and intersected with an illuminated lightning bolt.

The historic north elevation has been obscured in most historic photographs either by the angle of photography or by shadows. The building clearly reached from west to east under a flat roof with a parapet that sloped to the east in stair step segments, but the fenestration is unclear. At least one photograph from about the late 1930s shows an exposed stairway leading to an entrance on the second floor with the stairway and entrance both protected by two walls and a shed roof that project from the north elevation at the top of the stairs. At an early point in the building's history a distinct addition on the rear of the building, the east elevation, extended the north elevation to the east on the ground level but not on the second; this single story addition was given a gable roof.

The changes to the building have been extensive. Most noticeable is the addition of a board walkway and a corresponding balcony above with white fence rails and stanchions that convey the appearance of a riverboat, with both walkways covered. The stairway on the north elevation remains, but it leads to the walkway above instead of just to the entrance. The west elevation, the façade, has also been changed dramatically. The entrance is still located at the northwest corner of the building, but instead of being recessed at that corner, the corner has been clipped at a diagonal with the door located on that diagonal. The storefront windows still occupy the same space, although the clerestories have been enclosed. On the upstairs level, in addition to the balcony, the two separate windows have been replaced with a bay window that includes both of the earlier window spaces and the section of the elevation that had separated them. Of greater significance is the shift in the dimension of the elevation. The elevation now ends at the south limit of the windows. The adjacent area, the entrance to the stairway that leads up to the second level of the Clubhouse next door, is part of the Clubhouse

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Benson Building

and is clearly demarked as such. The net effect of the alteration is to dramatically reduce the length of the west elevation.

On the east elevation, the gabled extension remains, and beyond it yet another extension, this one with two stories and a balcony that matches the Benson Building, takes the combined structures to the alley on the east.

Because of the extensive changes to the building, the Benson building no longer appears to be eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. While this is seldom a black/white matter, the point is that there would be very substantial hurdles facing such a nomination.

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Jackson Hole Light & Power Building / Benson Building. West elevation. Originally, the elevation extended south to the north elevation of the Clubhouse at a point directly below the eave of the hipped roof visible in the upper right. Photo: Michael Cassity, 2004.

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Benson Building / Jackson Hole Light and Power Company Building, north elevation. Photo: Michael Cassity, 2004.

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Benson Building



Benson Building, north elevation, ground level, looking west. Note stairway in original location and also the inset in the elevation and the sloping canopy in the foreground where the building was extended to the east. Photo: Michael Cassity, 1999.

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Benson Building

Narrative Statement of Significance

The historic significance of this building lies in its association with the development of an electrical system for the town of Jackson and if otherwise eligible for the National Register it would qualify under Criterion A in the area of significance Commerce. Commerce in this case should be broadly construed as the force shaping the development of the community, including its very infrastructure. Two dimensions are involved in this process of community development, one that involved literally providing a system of electric power for the citizens of Jackson, and the second, the shadow, of the first extending more broadly. Providing electricity to the town generated huge changes, for this was a social rather than a narrowly technical transformation that involved the incorporation of more people into a grid of relationships, into a web of mutual dependency that ultimately grew to include the entire county.

Ed Benson settled in Jackson along Cache Creek on the east side of the town in 1917 and proceeded to construct a diversion of the creek that passed under his house and placed two water turbine generators in his basement. He thereby had electricity for his own use. Actually, generators in the valley were a common feature of life, and they drew their power from wind, streams, and diesel engines. This was but one of many examples and perhaps many of the ranches (and certainly the larger ones) in the valley had their own source of electric power and a number of people in town also did. In fact, remnants of this individually-based power production system still remain in the county, such as the 32 volt Wincharger windmill at the Roy and Ida Chambers ranch on Mormon Row, the old powerhouse at the STS / Murie Ranch that used an automobile engine to charge a series of fifty batteries, and the impressive Fitz Waterwheel Company water turbine installed at the Snake River Ranch in 1938, and that latter turbine replaced an earlier side-mounted water wheel. What was distinctive about Benson's arrangement, however, was that Benson started selling the energy that he produced to his neighbors and by the following year he reportedly had sixteen customers. This inchoate business caused him to limit the number of hours which his customers could count on having electricity and also to secure larger turbines. At the same time, he also developed his plans for expanding the operation and located a site on Flat Creek where the stream issued from the mountains to build a dam and new turbines

Benson proceeded with his business and in 1921 the town council of Jackson—the famous all female council that had been elected the previous fall—granted Benson the exclusive franchise to provide electricity to the town. Benson thereupon set about erecting utility poles along the streets and alleys of Jackson and stringing wires so that residents could access his new enterprise. On January 20, the Jackson's Hole *Courier* noted that even “during the recent bad storms and severely cold weather, they did not lay off a single day.” It also noted that “Mr. Benson plans to have meters installed, so each person can use all the juice he wants and pay accordingly.”

In 1923 Benson purchased this corner property from Bruce Porter and proceeded to erect his electric company's headquarters on it. His operation grew and more homes and businesses became clients

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Benson Building

of his electrical system. Electric lights began to replace the coal oil lamps and candles still very much in use and the more modern gasoline lamps that provided greater illumination. The beginnings of the new system were modest but held a vast potential. Hazel Francis recalled that in the Bluebird Café which she and her husband operated in the 1920s, they were permitted “one light on a drop.” She continues: “And if we left them on over night Mr. Benson would come down and turn them off.” They were charged twenty cents a kilowatt hour for lights so “you didn’t dare to have a lot of lights in your house.” In addition to electrical lights, though, electrically-powered appliances, widely circulated in cities of the East, began to filter into the valley and generated yet more demand for the energy that Benson generated. At some point before 1930 Benson built a dam and power plant on Flat Creek to generate more electricity and also diesel generators in a separate building on Kelly Avenue west of the park in Jackson. In 1931 Benson incorporated and Jackson Hole Light and Power Company, with Edward Benson as president, operated out of the Benson building. The company continued to grow, and seemed even to prosper, with capital expansion projects even during World War II.

At the same time that Benson’s company grew and made electrical power available in the community, the isolation—and independence—of the rural denizens also was being removed in other parts of the country. The Rural Electrification Administration was created in 1935 as part of the New Deal’s relief program, but the next year it became an independent statutory agency that provided loans for rural electrical development, with preference for those loans going to nonprofit cooperatives. The electrification of the countryside began slowly—with bitter resistance from the private companies who opposed this government measure but who also did not want to extend power lines beyond the limits of the population concentrations in towns and cities.¹ In 1937 a tenth of the farms in the nation were connected to the electrical grid and by 1950 nine-tenths were. Except for Teton County, and there the vast majority of rural homes remained unconnected.

One of the cooperatives that borrowed money to extend lines and build a generator was in the Star Valley south of Jackson. This cooperative was formed in 1937 and began producing and distributing electricity in 1938. Lower Valley Power and Light, Inc., a cooperative, gradually extended its service, and in 1952 launched a new phase of its operation when it acquired the Star Valley Power & Light at Afton and also the Jackson Hole Light & Power, as well as moving its lines into the rural areas of the county. In 1953 Jackson Hole Light & Power disappeared as the new company took its place and in 1959 Benson sold the building to Floyd Luton and his wife. Ed Benson retired to Florida, dying there in 1961. In the years of its historic significance, 1923-1953, the Benson building not only witnessed but contributed to the transformation of Jackson, Wyoming from a wood- and coal-burning stove and candle and lamp-lit community to a modern electrically powered town. And it also connected more and more people to the grid of electrical consumption, people who had previously operated on an independent system of power generation, or did without, and who now were brought into the world where the grid of electric power was a metaphor for the larger grid of social and economic power.

¹ See also Robert Righter’s discussion in *Wind Energy in America*, 111-118, in which he notes that the independent power companies, like the wind energy companies, were left out of the equation and ignored as a viable alternative, one in fact that many people clung to and that many preferred over the grid.

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Bibliography

"Electric Lights Soon," Jackson's Hole *Courier*, January 20, 1921.

"How Our Own Rural Electric System Has Grown since 1937," Jackson Hole *Guide*, May 12, 1960.

Interview with Hazel Francis, October 18, 1971, Jackson Hole Historical Society Oral History Collection.

Land Records, Office of the County Clerk, Teton County, Wyoming.

Righter, Robert, *Wind Energy in America: A History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996).

Schlesinger, Arthur M., Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt: The Politics of Upheaval, 1935-1936* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, Company, 1960).

Wyoming Secretary of State, Corporations Division, Corporate Records for Jackson Hole Light & Power Company.

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Benson Building

Geographical Data

Verbal Boundary Description

This property consists of part of lot 4, block 4, Clubhouse Addition, Town of Jackson.

Boundary Justification

This boundary includes the property historically associated with the Benson Building.