

TARL

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# history of post office construction 1900-1940

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The following report has been prepared to assist the Real Estate Representative in assessing the historical significance of individual postal facilities.

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#### INTRODUCTION

Resources listed in the National Register of Historic Places are significant in the context of the Nation, States or regions, and within specific communities. Individual samples of national building types, such as post offices, must be considered in each of these contexts before their significance can be properly evaluated. The focus here is on small buildings constructed by the Federal government primarily for use as post offices between 1900 and 1940. This report does not deal specifically with the larger buildings that housed post offices, courthouses and other federal facilities, nor does it touch on the smallest postal facilities which occupied leased quarters in nongovernmental buildings or quarters leased in federal buildings controlled by the General Services Administration.

Part I of this report discusses the history of Federal policy surrounding post office construction. Although by no means exhaustive, the information presented suggests certain categories within which post office buildings can be evaluated. The history of the Postal Service, national political and economic development, and general architectural trends are among the areas not addressed that shaped the construction of post offices around the country. In the context of these broad trends, the information provided here allows for the identification and evaluation of individual buildings within an appropriate historical context --

i.e., how Federal policies dictated or influenced the development of this building type. Part II of this report is intended to provide guidance in the collection and presentation of data required for evaluation of post offices. Like all other resources, post offices must first be evaluated for integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, and association. In addition, each structure should be placed in the national, state or regional, and local contexts. This section identifies factors that may contribute to the significance of post offices on each of these levels.

The third part of this report consists of sample descriptive statements of significance for actual and hypothetical post office buildings determined eligible for, or listed in, the National Register. These are not meant to serve as blueprints for nominations, but to present examples of possible elements of consideration that qualify post offices for eligibility determinations or listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

PART I: HISTORY OF FEDERAL POLICY CONCERNING POST OFFICE  
CONSTRUCTION 1900 - 1940

The history of American post office construction before World War II falls into three distinct phases, divided by events in 1915 and 1930. In the former year, the Secretary of the Treasury ordered the implementation of policies that would standardize the design of public buildings, in contrast to the previous practice of preparing an individual design for each structure. The onset of the depression in 1929-30 stimulated the development of public works programs that marked a new chapter in the history of government buildings.

1900-1915

James Knox Taylor was Supervising Architect of the Treasury from 1897 to 1912. He was succeeded by Oscar Wenderoth, who served from 1913 to 1914. During this period, the Office of the Supervising Architect was responsible for construction and maintenance of all government buildings. Acquisition of sites and construction occurred only with Congressional authorization. Under the provisions of the Tarsney Act, in effect from 1893 to 1912, buildings could either be designed within the Treasury or submitted to competitive bids among private architects and contracted out.

A new trend for twentieth century Federal construction was marked by the passage of the first omnibus public buildings

law in 1902.

This authorized one hundred fifty new projects, representing a significant departure from the nineteenth century practice of requiring individual legislation to authorize each building. This and subsequent omnibus bills saved a considerable amount of time in Congress but were often attributed to the desire of Congressmen to distribute "federal presents." The number of buildings under Treasury Department control increased from three hundred ninety-nine in 1899 to 1,126 in 1912, indicating the scope of these laws.<sup>1</sup> Many of the structures erected were post offices in smaller cities and developing towns.

Though designs for large projects were produced by private architects under the provisions of the Tarsney Act, most smaller buildings, including many of the new post offices, were designed within the Supervising Architect's office. This policy was established after an experiment in 1903-1904, in which less-than-\$500,000 projects were submitted to competition among architects in the project vicinity. Supervising Architect Taylor concluded from this experiment that the minimal funds available in these projects were not sufficient to attract skilled architects. As a result, most of the Post Offices outside of major cities were designed within the Treasury Department after 1904.<sup>2</sup>

In 1901, James Knox Taylor announced a return to the "classic style of architecture" for government buildings.<sup>3</sup>

This conformed to the spirit of the American Renaissance movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, epitomized in the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 and the subsequent city beautiful movement. Stylistic elements favored for public buildings were drawn from the French Beaux-Arts and NeoClassical traditions. An interest in America's own architectural heritage was reflected in Colonial Revival designs. Government buildings were designed to express Classical and democratic ideals and to symbolize power, organization and institutionalization.<sup>4</sup>

In 1907, the architectural journal The Brickbuilder published an article on Taylor's smaller buildings. The journal characterized his designs as "a splendid success in keeping abreast with the spirit of the times." The five examples of structures with construction costs of under \$100,000 displayed and illustrated Taylor's work. Described as "smaller types, which by reason of their moderate size and moderate cost, have come into local prominence only", the buildings incorporate the stylistic details and idealism of contemporary national trends. All five are of brick with stone and terracotta trim. Ornament and stylistic details are both NeoClassical and Colonial. The well proportioned symmetrical facades exhibit Beaux-Arts principles of massing. Interior plans vary since some of the structures are solely post offices, and others contain custom houses and court houses.<sup>5</sup>

Taylor's buildings were designed individually. Toward the end of his tenure as Supervising Architect, concern over the cost of government construction increased. In 1912, Taylor testified before the House of Representatives Committee on Expenditures on Public Buildings. In response to the question of why Government buildings were more expensive than commercial buildings he explained:

"In the first place, Government buildings are essentially single propositions - that is, they are not similar; there is no similarity between them and other constructions. Each is individual in itself".

He further stated that costs were high because, as opposed to commercial buildings where standard units dictated standard sized materials. "...there are no two buildings under the government service that are exactly the same in size ... in the immediate vicinity of each other." As a result, a separate contract was required for each building. In addition, Taylor pointed out, Federal buildings must be built to last and so must be of high quality materials and construction.<sup>6</sup>

These views, implying a firm resistance to the notion that designs for public buildings could be standardized, set the period of Taylor's tenure apart from the following years. Taylor resigned in 1912. He was succeeded by Supervising Architect Oscar Wenderoth. During Wenderoth's two-year administration, legislative changes occurred that had a profound impact on government architecture, particularly on small scale projects. The designs developed

in 1913 and 1914, however, reflect little substantive change from Taylor's policies. Wenderoth's post offices characteristically employed Renaissance Revival stylistic details including arcaded loggias. Similar to Taylor's in the use of ornament, symmetry and fine materials, the post offices designed during this administration brought the ideals of the Beaux-Arts movement to small cities and towns. A comment in The Architect, a professional journal, reflects the intended impact of small post office buildings constructed under Taylor and Wenderoth:

"They are generally the most important of local buildings, and taken together, seen daily by thousands, who have little opportunity to feel the influence of the great architectural works in the large cities."<sup>7</sup>

#### 1915-1930

Construction of a large number of public buildings was authorized by an omnibus Public Buildings Act in 1913, which stipulated that no new post office buildings would be authorized for communities with postal receipts totalling less than \$10,000.<sup>8</sup> That same year, the Public Buildings Commission was established by Congress to develop a scheme for the construction of all authorized public buildings and a standardized way to determine the size and project the cost of buildings. The policies that shaped post office construction changed after 1915 as a result of the implementation of recommendations by this commission. The establishment of the Public Buildings Commission, and the repeal of the Tarsney Act the previous

year, reflected a new desire to economize in government construction. Rising building costs as well as controversy over whether Congress authorized unnecessary buildings contributed to this new mood.<sup>9</sup> As a result, buildings authorized by the omnibus bill of 1913 were constructed under a new set of restrictions.

The Public Buildings Commission, chaired by Secretary of Treasury William McAdoo, presented its report to Congress in 1914,<sup>10</sup> and strongly recommended the "practical standardization of buildings" in order to diminish cost. This was to be accomplished by establishing categories for states and cities based on geographic and population conditions, and "the use of type sets of plans and specifications in the erection of buildings which are to be used solely for post offices in the same group." The report addressed the question of the monumental nature of government buildings. In spirit, it agreed with those who contended that government spending was excessive and that the goal of government construction in smaller communities should be primarily functional rather than expressive of democratic ideals or geared to establishing architectural precedent. This is most clearly stated in their recommendation that:

There be adopted a less costly, but durable, simple and architecturally desirable construction which shall permit economical operation and maintenance. While monumental structures have a place in Government construction there should be discrimination in the selection of the cities in which they shall be erected, and recognition of the rule that the buildings to be

constructed should be suitable for the locations in which they are to be erected, conforming to their surroundings and providing adequate quarters for all branches of the Government there found.<sup>11</sup>

In 1915 Secretary of the Treasury McAdoo (chairman of the Public Buildings Commission) stated in his annual report that he had issued an order to the Supervising Architect establishing a classification of buildings. "Its purpose," he stated, "is to provide a rational system of uniformity and business economy in designing and constructing public buildings, so that buildings suitable to the public needs may be built without waste of government money." The following four classes were established by the Secretary:

CLASS A

Definition-Buildings that include a post office of the first class with annual receipts of \$800,000 or over; the site forming part of a city development plan or situated on an important thoroughfare of a great city; improvements on adjoining property reaching the higher valuation of metropolitan real estate

Character of Building-marble or granite facing; fireproof throughout; metal frames, sashes, and doors; interior finish to include the finer grades of marble, ornamental bronze work, mahogany, etc. Public spaces to have monumental treatment, mural decorations; special interior, lighting fixtures.

CLASS B

Definition-Buildings that include a post office of the first class with receipts from \$60,000 to \$800,000; valuation of adjoining property somewhat below the higher valuation of metropolitan real estate.

Character of Building-Limestone or sandstone facing; fireproof throughout, exterior frames and sash metal; interior frames, sash and doors wood. Interior finish to exclude the more expensive woods and marbles; ornamental metal to be used only where iron is suitable. Restricted ornament in public spaces.

CLASS C

Definition-Buildings that include a post office of the second class with receipts of \$15,00 or over, and of the first class to \$60,000 receipts; valuation of surrounding property that of a second-class city.

Character of Building-Brick facing with stone or terracotta trimmings; fireproof floors, nonfireproof roof; frames, sashes, and doors wood; interior finish to exclude the more expensive woods and marbles; the latter used only where sanitary conditions demand; public spaces restricted to very simple forms of ornament.

CLASS D

Definition-Buildings that include a post office having annual receipts of less than \$15,000; real estate values satisfying only a limited investment for improvements.

Character of Building-Brick facing, little stone or terracotta used; only first floor fireproof; stock sash, frames, doors, etc., where advisable; ordinary class of building, such as any businessman would consider a reasonable investment in a small town.

The Secretary further stated that application of the classification system was intended to insure construction of "buildings adapted to local conditions and in keeping with the importance of the communities in which they are to be erected," and that "like conditions will receive similar treatment." He estimated that these policies would save many thousands of dollars. McAdoo noted that the partial implementation of a policy of "utilizing, whenever practicable, the plans of buildings previously constructed" during fiscal year 1915 had increased the output of the Supervising Architect's office significantly, and would be put into full effect in 1916.<sup>12</sup>

In 1917, the Supervising Architect stated in his annual report that Secretary McAdoo's classification system had

been fully implemented and that the results "obtained justify the continuance of that classification in the interest of economy and the equitable treatment of the communities in which public buildings have been authorized to be constructed." The system enabled the office to produce an increased number of buildings at a lower cost than would otherwise have been possible.<sup>13</sup>

In this report, Acting Supervising Architect Wetmore reported that in 1916, a building type was standardized for thirty communities, and that twenty-seven buildings of this type were placed under contract, demonstrating the practicability of standardized design. He pointed out, however, that since costs varied in relation to different locations, and the market fluctuated, the cost ranged from \$38,000 to \$57,000 for almost identical plans.<sup>14</sup>

These policies of standardizing plans and constructing cost-efficient public buildings continued throughout the 1920's. Post Offices, particularly those in small communities, were constructed as far as possible according to plans established in conformance with conditions and community needs. Stylistically, the majority retained the basic elements of Beaux-Arts massing and plan. Classical details, however, were kept to a minimum in small buildings due to cost limitations, and floor plans did not vary unless there was a specific unusual need. Rather than spending the time and money required to design each building indivi-

dually, as during Taylor's and Wenderoth's administrations, an effort was made to use the same design as frequently as possible.

Construction of public buildings tapered off with the onset of World War I, and came to a halt when America entered the war in 1917. After the armistice, construction resumed slowly for previously authorized buildings.

Enabling legislation was brought before Congress several times during the 1920's, as the need for a new building program was increasingly recognized. No new construction laws were enacted, however, until 1926.

The Public Buildings Act of May 25, 1926, known as the Keyes-Elliott Act contrasted with previous omnibus acts which authorized appropriations for specified buildings. This was a general enabling act, and allotted \$100,000,000 for buildings outside the District of Columbia, limiting spending in any one state to \$5,000,000 and specifying that not more than \$25,000,000 could be spent annually. The Act stipulated that:

"in so far as relates to buildings to be used in whole or in part for post office purposes, the Secretary of the Treasury, under regulations to be prescribed by him, shall act jointly with the Postmaster General in the selection of towns or cities in which buildings are to be constructed and the selection of sites therein. Provided further, that all sketches, plans and estimates for buildings shall be approved by the Secretary of the Treasury and the heads of the executive departments which are to be located in such buildings"

To accomplish this, the Secretary of the Treasury and the Postmaster General were directed to conduct a nationwide survey on the need for postal facilities. Based on this survey, an annual report was to be submitted to Congress detailing the estimated costs and proposed locations of buildings. The act also authorized the Secretary of the Treasury to hire outside architects in "special cases" to prepare designs and floor plans that would serve as guides for working drawings and specifications produced within the Supervising Architect's office. This was the first time since the repeal of the Tarsney Act in 1913 that the Treasury Department was authorized to hire outside architects.<sup>15</sup>

The Secretary of the Treasury submitted the required survey report to the House Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds in 1927. This survey listed 799 towns and cities with postal receipts for the calendar year 1925 exceeding \$20,000 and 1512 with postal receipts between \$10,000 and \$20,000 that were without Federal buildings. The estimated cost of erected buildings in these cities was \$170,420,000.<sup>16</sup>

The Public Buildings Act of 1926 marked the continuing trend toward an increased emphasis on efficiency in Federal construction. The hiatus in building caused by World War I provided ample time for rethinking the goals and procedures of the Federal buildings program. The stipulation that construction of post offices would be

based on needs of the Post Office Department, as analyzed by the Postmaster General and the Secretary of Treasury, placed the priority on necessity, seeking to end superfluous construction and to limit the charges that the Federal buildings program was merely a means for Congressmen to win local favor. The same goals of business efficiency dictated the continuation of standardized plans for small structures. A statement in the original version of the Public Buildings Act, although omitted from the language of the enacted legislation, reflects the policies of the Treasury Department:

"...in designing and constructing buildings under the provisions of this Act preferences shall be given so far as practicable, to standardized types, and in other cases where possible and appropriate to commercial types modified to meet government requirements, rather than to buildings of monumental character.<sup>17</sup>

#### 1930-1940

Full implementation of the building program as outlined in the Act of 1926 was delayed by the crash of 1929 and the subsequent depression. Government policies in response to the economic crisis developed from the 1926 law. However, utilizing the 1927 survey of needs it produced and maintained goals of efficient planning and construction. The Public Buildings Program was vastly expanded during the 1930s, and the number of post offices constructed during the decade was more than three times the number constructed during the previous fifty years.<sup>18</sup>

On May 31, 1930, Congress authorized increased funding for public buildings by amending the Public Buildings Act of 1926. They also authorized the Secretary of the Treasury to "employ, by contract or otherwise, outside professional or technical services of persons, firms or corporations, to such extent as he may require" without reference to Civil Service Regulations.<sup>19</sup> The legislation marked the beginning of the trend in public works projects that came in direct response to the depression. It served as the precedent for subsequent policies and acts that would attempt to relieve unemployment and stabilize the economy. Nearly one-half of the nation's architectural firms failed during the first year of the depression, and the Act of 1930 was a first step in allowing the government to reduce unemployment in the profession.<sup>20</sup>

The Federal Employment Stabilization Act of 1931 stressed advanced planning to prevent unemployment and directed construction agencies to prepare six-year buildings plans.<sup>21</sup> The appropriations for public buildings were increased by \$100,000,000 that year. Two hundred sixty-seven staff members were added to the Supervising Architect's office increasing the work force to almost eight hundred. One hundred thirty-three architectural firms were commissioned to design Federal buildings during the fiscal year.<sup>22</sup>

Increased volume of building activity did not dramatically change design policy for small post offices during the early

years of the depression. Standardization continued to be a priority. The Treasury Department produced a set of "Cabinet Sketches" which provided standard floor plans for post offices of different sizes. Where practicable, individual treatment was given to exterior details. The priority, however, was on minimizing the number of individual drawings in order to achieve speedy construction. The interest of economic recovery could not be served with a slow design process. The goal was to construct many buildings as quickly as possible.<sup>23</sup>

In 1933, the Treasury Department was reorganized and the Supervising Architect's office placed within the Procurement Branch in the Division of Public Works. Several laws enacted that year added bureaucratic complexity to the government construction program. The National Industrial Recovery Act created the Public Works Administration (PWA). The PWA was authorized to disburse funds to both Federal and non-Federal agencies for construction projects that would benefit the public. In its final report of 1939, the PWA characterized the local post office as the most typical and widely used of its building projects. A total of 406 post offices were built using PWA funds. This represented nearly one-eighth of the 3,174 total PWA construction projects.<sup>24</sup> In addition, under legislation passed in March 1933, the funds appropriated under the Public Buildings Act of 1926 became unavailable except for completion of projects under contract. Authorizations

for new projects would be funded through emergency construction programs. The Secretary of Treasury and the Postmaster General were to continue to select projects for construction from the 1927 survey report prepared as a result of the 1926 legislation.<sup>25</sup>

The Treasury Department annual reports reflected the complexity of the expanded Federal buildings program. The report of Fiscal Year 1935, for example, listed construction projects under the auspices of the original Public Buildings Program authorized by the 1926 act; the PWA; the Relief Program authorized by the Emergency Relief and Construction Act of July 21, 1932; the Emergency Construction Program under the Appropriation Act of June 1934; and the Building Program for the District of Columbia, authorized by the Act of 1926.<sup>26</sup> The construction of post offices, funded through these different programs, was entirely under the auspices of the Treasury Department, and did not come under the authority of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), established in 1935.

In keeping with the goal of alleviating unemployment in the architectural profession, private architects received contracts to design Government buildings after 1930. At the end of Fiscal Year 1934, the number of Treasury Department projects contracted to private architects had swelled to 301. An article in Architectural Forum in September 1933 summarized the requirements of a private

architect who received the commission to design a post office. It explained:

The routine of the Post Office Department has been highly perfected and demands a building in absolute adjustment to its needs. Through the years of specialization in post office design, the Office of the Supervising Architect has developed a technique and a constantly improved standardization of plan and detail to fill these needs efficiently and economically. In architectural design the Department has provided local post office buildings that are a credit to the communities and one in accord with the traditions of the localities.

The specifications outlined by the Treasury Department, according to the journal, "are necessary practical limitations but still leave wide latitude for architectural design and ingenuity." This architectural innovation was apparently limited to treatment of the facades, since there was little room for change in the plan.

The article cited a detailed publication of the Treasury Department entitled "Instructions to Private Architects Engaged on Public Building Work under the Jurisdiction of the Treasury Department," and presented a functional chart to illustrate its summary. No known examples of this publication exist.<sup>27</sup>

The policy of employing private architects varied according to the way the project was funded. In Fiscal Year 1937, the report of the Office of the Supervising Architect in the Report of the Secretary of the Treasury stated:

In accordance with the policy established by the Secretary of the Treasury three years ago, all buildings in the program have been designed in the Office of the Supervising Architect and the drawings and specifications for projects designed under the previous policy have been largely completed.

While there is no mention of this change in policy elsewhere, the number of projects contracted out to private architects dropped from 301 in 1934, to 165 in 1935, and to 4 in 1937. The policy of employing private architects for projects under the control of the Treasury Department was apparently terminated by June 30, 1937.<sup>28</sup>

The Public Buildings Branch (Public Works Branch prior to 1936) of the Procurement Division of the Treasury Department was organized in the interest of efficiency. In 1935, an Office of Space Control was established to further streamline the designs of new buildings. Studies by this department were to develop a system for determining size and space allocations in all new buildings.<sup>29</sup> The annual reports for the mid-1930s indicate that the Office of the Supervising Architect was working with the advisory committees on engineering and architecture to prepare a codified Manual of Design. In 1936, the Office was:

...continuing the study of each project in its preliminary stage in order that the requirements may be properly related to site and surroundings, and that an equitable balance may be developed in the use of materials that will spread the benefits of the Public Buildings Program as much as possible among all producing industries.<sup>30</sup>

The annual report for Fiscal Year 1937 indicated that the new studies and organizations had not changed the basic methods of design and construction of post office buildings:

A large portion of the program has consisted of small post office buildings spread over the entire United States. Type designs were developed, and in order to meet the varying requirements of the Post Office Department and the sectional architectural traditions eleven designs, were required. By thus standardizing the designs, there resulted a great saving in time and cost of production of the drawings and specifications, and the placing of these projects on the market was greatly expedited. The buildings which have been constructed from these type designs have proved economical and satisfactory. Special effort has been made to improve the appearance of the sites by appropriate landscaping. The policy of preparing drawings and specifications permitting to the greatest practicable extent the use of materials and products native to the localities has resulted in stimulating employment and spreading the benefits of the building program.

Little can be gleaned from the reports of the Treasury Department during the 1930s about policies governing the stylistic elements of post offices. Government architecture of the period was most often either in a simplified classical style characterized by symmetrical massing and unornamented surfaces, or in the Colonial Revival style. In The Federal Presence, Lois Craig described the former as "Starved Classicism," a sort of synthesis of modern and classical stylistic elements. To insure transmission of the classical message, Craig points out, the ideals it represented were often incised on the building facades.<sup>32</sup>

The preference for this classically inspired style is evident in the 1939 publication by C.W. Short and R. Stanley Brown which illustrates projects funded by the Public Works

Administration (PWA). Colonial Revival designs are the second most frequent among those illustrated. The vast majority of post office buildings designed, both by private architects and within the Office of the Supervising Architect during the 1930s, were in one of these two styles, symbolic of both America's past and her future progress, and increasingly the architectural symbol of the Federal Government.<sup>33</sup> While design policy was governed largely by economic considerations, there was a renewed effort to create buildings symbolic of government strength and ideals. For local citizens, buildings were meant to represent the government's efforts to restore economic health.

Art work was introduced into post offices around the country during the depression era. Murals, paintings, and, to a lesser extent, sculpture, were added to Government buildings through the Public Works of Art Program (PWAP), organized in 1933. This program was terminated in 1934. Later the same year, the Section of Painting and Sculpture was added to the Procurement Division of the Treasury Department, directed by the former administrators of the PWAP. This temporary program was replaced by the permanent Section of Fine Arts in October 1938. The Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP), implemented in 1935, provided further funding for works of art in Government buildings. Grant money from the Works Progress Administration (WPA) financed TRAP, which hired more highly skilled artists than the other

relief programs. The interiors of hundreds of Government buildings were ornamented in this attempt to subsidize local artists and to bring art to the American people. Artists were selected through anonymous competitions, and were commissioned to produce literal representations of the American scene.<sup>34</sup>

In 1939, Government Reorganization took the control of Federal architecture out of the Treasury Department. The Reorganization Act of April 3, 1939, and following Reorganization Plans, created the Public Buildings Administration as part of the Federal Works Agency (FWA). The new administration consolidated the Public Buildings Branch of the Procurement Division (including the Office of the Supervising Architect) and the Branch of Buildings Management of the National Park Service. The new agency was headed by a Commissioner of Public Buildings, appointed by the Federal Works Administrator.<sup>35</sup>

There is little indication that this reorganization substantially changed the policies surrounding post office construction for the next several years. During Fiscal Year 1940, over 200 small post office buildings that cost between \$70,000 and \$100,000 for site purchase, construction, and administrative expenses were erected. The report of the Federal Works Agency for that year cited a post office constructed in Mayville, Wisconsin, as a typical example. The report explained that the size of the building and

equipment required were based on the local post office business over a ten-year period with provision for growth. Mayville, an agricultural and small-industry town, had increased its postal receipts from \$8,000 in 1910 to \$18,000 in 1940. The requirement that postal receipts must exceed \$10,000 for construction of a building was still in effect. After the site was selected by Federal officials with the advise of the local postmaster, the local postmaster answered a series of questionnaires to indicate local requirements. An engineer from the nearest field office prepared a topographical survey. The fundamental data and needs were then analyzed by a Public Buildings Administration "architectural group," including a designer and mechanical and structural engineers.

According to the report, "Architecturally, the building was planned to conform to the dominant style of the locality, and for the Mayville project a simple, contemporary design was created." The floor plan described conforms to the standard plans of the 1930s with public lobby separated from the workroom, and standard arrangement of offices, platform, and "look-out." The contract for the building was awarded to the lowest bidder. One percent of the construction cost was made available to the Section of Fine Arts, and a Milwaukee artist who was a "runner-up" in a national competition was commissioned to paint a local farm scene. The report noted public interest in the project manifested in a cornerstone laying ceremony and

the dedication of the building on Memorial Day with an accompanying parade.

The 1940 report indicated that the Mayville post office was a typical building constructed during the year. It noted that almost all designs for Federal buildings outside the District of Columbia originated within the Public Buildings Administration, although four regional competitions were held.<sup>16</sup> Similar policies for construction and design continued until 1942, when all peace-time projects were suspended due to the need to "concentrate upon war-connected effort." This marked the suspension of Post Office construction until after World War II, when the Federal buildings program was reconstituted under the General Services Administration.<sup>37</sup>

The reports of the Treasury Department, the PWA, and the FWA reflect the goals of the Federal construction program during the 1930s. Established primarily to aid economic recovery, the programs of the depression era emphasized efficiency, speed construction, stimulation of the economy, and the alleviation of unemployment. The expanded building program spread Federal architecture to numerous communities around the nation, establishing a vast and prominent "Federal presence." The primary goal, however, was not to create architectural monuments to patriotic idealism but, particularly in the construction of smaller buildings, to develop efficient programs that would help provide a solution to the economic crisis. The numerous public

buildings constructed under these programs were tangible evidence of the Government's new activist role.

In general, the post offices constructed during this period conformed to standardized plans. Stylistic detail varied but most buildings had simplified classical or colonial-inspired designs. Economy, as well as the movement toward modernism, dictated streamlined design and minimum ornamentation. The policies of the 1930s bear a striking resemblance to the Secretary of the Treasury's dictum of 1915 which led to the standardization of small buildings. The post offices built after 1930, however, were differentiated from those of earlier periods by the sheer numbers built, the goals of economic recovery, and in some cases by the designs of private architects and the murals or sculpture of local artists.

FOOTNOTES

1. Craig, Lois and the staff of the Federal Architecture Project, The Federal Presence: Architecture, Politics, and Symbols in the United States Government Building, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1979), p. 213
2. Testimony of the Supervising Architect, Hearings before the Committee on Expenditures on Public Buildings, House of Representatives, under House Resolution 103, 62nd Congress, First Session, (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1912). (hereafter referred to as Testimony of The Supervising Architect)
3. Craig, Lois, The Federal Presence, p. 232
4. Craig, Lois, The Federal Presence; Wilson, Richard G., "The Great Civilization" in Brooklyn Museum, The American Renaissance: 1876-1917, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979) see especially Chapter 6 and notes for further sources
5. "Work of Supervising Architect Taylor", The Brick-builder, Vol. 16, No. 5, May 1909, pp. 79-83
6. Testimony of the Supervising Architect, 1912
7. Newman, William Arthur; "The Largest Architectural Office in The World: The Office of The Supervising Architect of the Treasury", The Architect, Vol. XV; No. 3, March 1918, p. 188
8. Smith, Carrell Hevenor, The Office of The Supervising Architect of the Treasury: Its History, Activities and Organization, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1923, original edition issued as No. 23 of Service Monographs of The United States Government), p. 32
9. Craig, Lois, The Federal Presence, p. 237.
10. Report of The Public Buildings Commission, 63rd Congress, Second Session, House of Representatives, Document #936, (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1914), p. 6. As of January 1, 1914, there were 864 government buildings, 120 in the course of construction, and 310 projects authorized for sites not yet purchased. The only limitation on construction at the time was that no post offices where receipts were under \$10,000 were to be authorized. In 1913, there were 508 such post offices, all of which occupied leased quarters.
11. Ibid, p. 7
12. Secretary of the United States Treasury Department, Annual Report on the Finances: 1915, (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1915)
13. Annual Report of The Supervising Architect of The Treasury Department for the Fiscal Year ended June 30, 1917, (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1917), p. 4
14. Ibid., p. 5
15. Public Buildings Act of May 25, 1926, in Statutes At Large of The United States of America, December 1925 to

March 1927, Vol. 44, Part 2, Chapt. 380, pp. 630-635 (United States Government Printing Office: 1927)

16. "History of Federal Construction Work Since World War I", unpublished manuscript by staff of the Public Buildings Administration, General Services Administration, 1948. In the possession of Mr. Karel Yasko, counselor for Fine Arts and Historic Preservation, GSA.
17. Hearings before the Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds, House of Representatives, 69th Congress, 1st Session on H.R. 6559, Public Buildings Act. (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1926).
18. Current (1980) statistics provided by the U. S. Postal Service.
19. An Act to amend the Public Buildings Act of 1926 in The Statutes at Large of The United States of America from April 1929 to March 1931, Vol. XLVI, Part I, Chapt. 99, pp. 136-137, Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1931
20. Craig, Lois, The Federal Presence, pp. 327
21. America Builds: The Record of the Public Works Administration, (United States Government Printing Office, 1939)
22. "History of Federal Construction Work Since WWI", p. 37,
- 19
23. Ibid, p. 45; "Cabinet Sketches for Post Offices", in the possession of Mr. Karel Yasko, GSA.
24. America Builds, p. 106
25. U.S. Treasury Department, Annual Report of the Secretary of the Treasury on the State of the Finances for the Fiscal Year ended June 30, 1933 and June 30, 1934, (Washington, DC, United States Government Printing Office); hereafter referred to as Annual Report of the Secretary of Treasury
26. Annual Report of the Secretary of the Treasury, Fiscal Year 1935, pp. 151-154
27. Architectural Forum, September 1933, pp. 222-230
28. Annual Report of the Secretary of the Treasury, Fiscal Year 1933, 1935, 1937
29. Ibid., Fiscal Year 1935
30. Ibid., Fiscal Year 1936, p. 177
31. Ibid., Fiscal Year 1937, pp. 182-183
32. Craig, Lois, The Federal Presence, p. 286
33. Ibid, Chapter 6; McDonald, Travis C. "A Federal Image in the 1930s", unpublished manuscript in the possession of the author, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA
34. Annual Report of the Secretary of the Treasury, Fiscal Year 1935, 1936; Craig, Lois, The Federal Presence, p. 372
35. United States Federal Works Administration, First Annual Report of the Federal Works Administration, for Fiscal Year 1939, (Washington, DC, United States Government Printing Office, 1940), pp 78-83
36. Annual Report of The Federal Works Administration, Fiscal Years 1941, 1942
37. Reorganization Plan No. I in United States Statutes at Large, 1939, Vol. 63, pt. 2, p. 1427. (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1939); Craig, Lois, The Federal Presence, p. 327

Number Of Post Offices Constructed

Year	Total	Privately Owned*	Government Owned
1880-1889	9	5	4
1890-1899	12	4	8
1900	29	29	0
1901	5	3	2
1902	6	5	1 omnibus b
1903	6	2	4
1904	8	6	2
1905	14	4	12
1906	10	5	5
1907	14	7	7
1908	4	2	2
1909	12	2	10
1910	30	5	25
1911	35	7	28
1912	33	6	27
1913	40	3	37
1914	40	5	35
1915	49	6	43 standard
1916	42	6	36
1917	39	3	36
1918	67	15	52
1919	34	14	20
1920	23	13	10
1921	8	5	3
1922	7	4	3
1923	17	8	9
1924	21	8	13
1925	34	16	18
1926	23	6	17
1927	21	13	8
1928	34	12	22
1929	34	17	17
1930	28	16	12
1931	46	5	41
1932	136	33	103
1933	210	30	180
1934	118	25	93
1935	211	26	185
1936	301	41	260
1937	332	29	303
1938	291	32	259
1939	188	28	160

PART II: EVALUATION OF POST OFFICE BUILDINGS

As identified in the introduction, a post office may be listed in the National Register of Historic Places because it is historically or architecturally significant in the context of the Nation, the State or region, or the locality. The information required for evaluation will vary for different structures based on the context in which it is most important. It may not be necessary, for example, to extensively describe the local context of a building that is architecturally distinctive in the nation. National, state, and local significances are not, however, mutually exclusive categories. In most cases, effective evaluation by the National Register will require information that treats the post office as an example of a national building type, sensitively placing it in regional or state and local contexts.

The following sections briefly outline the meaning of the National, State and local contexts for post office buildings. They are followed by a list of suggested sources of information for assembling documentation on post offices. It is hoped that the examples furnished in Part III will show how the points outlined in this section bear on the significance of individual structures.

\*These are post offices leased to the United States Government. Almost all are less than 2,000 square feet and represent post offices that had postal receipts of under \$10,000 at the time of construction.

#### National Level

The history of federal construction policy provides a chronological framework for assessing individual structures that places them in the context of national development. Dates of design and construction thus provide basic information about each post office as an example of a national building type. The specific information required for each structure will be partially dictated by its place in the development of construction policy. Placing a post office at the national level will also require information on how it reflects broad architectural or historical trends.

Three periods of construction were outlined in Part I of this report. Important points are summarized as follows:

1900-1915: Post offices designed during the administration of Supervising Architects James Knox Taylor and Oscar Wenderoth:

In general, these buildings were individually designed and constructed of fine materials. They were intended as monuments that would bring Federal ideas and sophisticated architecture to communities around the nation. Small structures that were designed by private architects after 1904 are typical. Neoclassic details were favored by Supervising Architect Taylor. Buildings designed by Supervising Architect Wenderoth characteristically have Romanesque arches, but have other details similar to Taylor's buildings.

Total post offices constructed by the Federal Government during this period was 335.

1916-1929: Buildings designed during the administration of Acting Supervising Architect James Wetmore:

This period was shaped by new goals of efficient administration and construction. A classification system was established and a policy of utilizing standardized plans implemented. An effort was made to use the same design for as many buildings as possible, minimizing the number of drawings produced. With these new efficiency-oriented goals, an effort was made to design buildings that conformed to local traditions. For the smallest post office, the Secretary of the Treasury specified that "an ordinary class of building, such as any businessman would consider a reasonable investment in a small town" should be erected. Private architects were not employed in post office construction during this period.

Total post offices constructed by the Federal Government during this period was 404.

1930-1940: Post offices constructed during the administrations of Acting Supervising Architect Wetmore and Supervising Architect Louis A. Simon:

The Depression initiated a vastly expanded Public Buildings Program. Three times as many post offices were constructed between 1930 and 1939 as during the

previous fifty years. The Federal program implemented during this period stressed speedy and efficient construction to relieve unemployment and stimulate the economy. Standard plans were employed, although there was room for stylistic innovation in facade treatment. On some projects, local architects were employed. Art work was added to numerous buildings as part of an effort to employ artists. The post offices constructed during this period, like the thousands of other public building projects, were tangible evidence of the Federal Government's new activist role.

Total post offices constructed by the Federal Government during this period was 1861.

#### Regional Level

A survey of post offices constructed in a given State can provide a comparative data base that will make it possible to evaluate individual structures in their regional context. Important information for a survey includes precise dates (both of authorization and completion); dimensions of the original structure; information on alterations and additions (including dimensions and dates); and name(s) or architect(s) and/or other personnel involved in construction. Survey of extant public works program art work is essential for evaluating the significance of 1930s post offices. Other categories of information will depend on the particular circumstances within the State. Such a survey will identify extant resources. It can provide a comparative framework for identification of both standard and unusual designs. The information provided by a survey can shed light on the relationship between Federal construction policy and regional history.

Once information is gathered the history of national construction policy can be utilized to formulate categories that will clarify the effect of policy and general historical trends on post office construction within the State. Examples of ways in which a survey can place post offices in regional history include establishing the relationship of post office construction within the State to population growth, to the

development of cities and towns, or to the power of a particular Congressman or Senator.

Comparison of buildings within the State may identify alterations and additions, facilitating an assessment of a particular building's integrity. In addition a survey may shed light on the architectural merits of a post office building. The frequency with which a particular standard design was utilized in the State may bear on its significance. For instance, a small post office may not appear significant in a state where its particular design was employed frequently. In a State where it is the only example of this design, however, it may be deemed a significant example of a Federal building type.

The value of a comparative survey of post offices cannot be overemphasized. In some cases it is possible to evaluate the significance of a post office without this information. However, since each post office represents an example of a building type, effective evaluation often cannot proceed without a comparative data base.

#### Local Level

Local significance is perhaps the most difficult category to assess. It is therefore, essential that information placing a post office building in the local context be thorough, well documented, and specific to the site. The most effective presentation will combine information on the building's place in the National and Regional contexts with an assessment of its significance on the local level.

It is difficult to generalize about the local context, since communities differ widely. The local significance of a post office may depend on many factors. One is the structure's relationship to the local built environment in terms of historic and current architectural development. The building may also be significant because of its place in local historical development. Its relationship to local, social, economic, or political trends, or to important events are items that contribute to this aspect of local significance.

A post office's significance may be based on its role in the town's relationship to the Federal Government. This may depend on such factors as the presence of other Federal buildings in the community or vicinity; the relationship of the post office to other public buildings both in terms of location and architecture; or the impact of its construction on the history of the community's relationship to the Federal Government.

For a post office constructed during the 1930s, the local context may be particularly important. The building may be significant on the basis of the documented impact if its construction, a Federal Works project on the local economic situation and/or political and intellectual climate. Use of local materials in an innovative manner, or in a way stimulating to the local economy, may contribute to the significance of the structure.

#### Sources of Information

General: See Footnotes, Part I of this report, for full bibliographic citations.

Computer listing of post offices with date of first occupation, available from the Office of Real Estate (USPS), also from the National Register of Historic Places

Inventory of murals in post office buildings, GSA prepared ca. 1948. Available from the General Services Administration, also from the National Register of Historic Places and the Office of Real Estate.

Individual Structures: Records of the Public Buildings Service, National Archives, Washington, DC.

These include the office files of the Office of Supervising Architect with correspondence files for most individual structures; also architectural drawings, cabinet sketches, etc.

See also Photographs at Still Pictures Branch of the National Archives; drawings at Cartographic Division of N.A.

See Preliminary Inventory No. 110, Records of the Public Buildings Service (Washington, 1958) available from the National Archives; and Letters to the Editor, Society of Architectural Historians Journal, Dec. 1961, Vol. XX, No. 4, pp. 198-199 for summary of inventory.

Further suggestions:

Local Historian  
Local Newspapers  
Local Guidebooks (Chamber of Commerce)  
Drawings and other information on file within each Post Office.  
Libraries

PART III: EXAMPLES

Three examples of descriptive statements of significance for post offices follow.

One sample is provided for each of the periods outlined in Part I of this report. The first example is based on a building actually determined eligible for the National Register of Historic Places which was demolished in 1978. The information is adapted from Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) data prepared by Dan Peterson, AIA, of Santa Rosa, California in November 1977. The other two examples are hypothetical.

These examples attempt to illustrate how national, state and local contexts should be addressed in describing and evaluating individual structures. They reflect the fact that significant post offices must be understood in these three contexts, as well as in terms of their integrity, and that it is usually the relationship of these contexts to one another that defines a significant structure eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

1900-1915

The Santa Rosa Post Office, designed by James Knox Taylor, FAIA, Supervising Architect of the Treasury, illustrates the beginning of a new design trend for smaller government buildings in communities throughout California. Later

examples of these were designed by Oscar Wenderoth, Supervising Architect of the Treasury after Taylor, which show stronger influence of the Spanish Revival style than this building with its Roman details. Nevertheless, the Spanish design clay tile roof and stuccoed walls indicate Taylor's efforts to create an architecture that would harmonize with local history, climate, and environment. The building is sensitively designed and represents a fine example of Taylor's work. It contains one of the most advanced hot water heating systems in California of its time, and was one of the earliest buildings in the State to use mission tile on the hip roof.

Construction of the post office was authorized by a bill introduced in Congress in 1906 by Representative D. C. McKinley of California's Second District. In April 1906, shortly after this authorization, a large portion of downtown Santa Rosa was devastated by an earthquake. Erection of the post office was an important contribution to the reconstruction of the downtown area. The building served as a post office and housed other Federal offices until 1967 when a new Federal building was constructed. Alterations include a rear addition, modification of the mail platform, and an addition to the west mezzanine in ca. 1926. In 1967, the workroom was altered for use as a data processing center. This included removal of public counters, screenline, and postal boxes, and the

addition of new air conditioning, partitions, and a suspended ceiling. While the building, therefore, no longer contains original fabric related to postal use, most of the interior architectural features are intact, as is the exterior detailing. It remains a fine example of the Federal architecture of the early twentieth century, as well as a period in the history in the development of downtown Santa Rosa.

Adapted from HABS data prepared by Dan Peterson, AIA of Santa Rosa, California in 1977.

#### 1915-1930

The U. S. Post Office in East Bicycle, Bicycle County, Any State, was designed in 1917 and construction was completed in 1918. It is a one-story brick building with a Neoclassical pedimented central portico. The arched central entrance is flanked by narrow windows within the porch area, and there are two bayside wings on either side of the center section. A brick parapet has wooden baulstrades over the window bays. The four-bay side elevations each have palladian windows in the second bay surrounded by wood trim resembling the portico. A rear addition obscures the original trim and has replaced the original loading dock. Original interior pine trim and marble veneer are in place, and the interior detailing echoes the arched openings and fanlights of the exterior.

The East Bicycle Post Office was built several blocks from the original commercial center of town. Its construction

was followed by subsequent commercial development surrounding it as population increases led to the growth of the downtown area. A simple landscape design was included in the original plan for the post office and has been retained, although the trees have been recently replaced due to a blight. This is the only landscaped space in East Bicycle's downtown area outside of the town square.

The Colonial Revival - Neoclassical detailing of the post office is distinctive from the bulk of the commercial cornices characteristic of nineteenth century commercial buildings in the state. It contrasts with the City Hall and local public library which also date from the late nineteenth century. The Federal Government is thus represented locally by an architectural style distinct from the surrounding built environment.

A survey of post offices constructed in Any State between 1915 and 1930 reveals that the East Bicycle Post Office was constructed according to a standard design for "Class D" Government buildings, which included post offices with less than \$15,000 in annual postal receipts. The same design was utilized in five of the twelve county seats in the State where post offices were constructed during this period. Careful comparison of these five post offices indicates that the East Bicycle Post Office is the only one to retain all its original interior and exterior trim and plan configuration, with the exception of that obscured by the rear addition.

1930-1940

The U. S. Post Office in Onetown, Your State, was constructed in 1935. It is one of twenty-nine post offices constructed in the state with Public Works Administration funds. The commission for the design of the post office was awarded to Craig Rogers, a local architect, and the contract for building given to the local contractors D. Dogan and Sons. Construction in Onetown, a growing community prior to the crash of 1929, had virtually ceased in the 1930s. With the closing of the local corset factory, many citizens were unemployed. This post office construction project was, therefore, greeted with great optimism for the boost it would bring to the local economy. Unfortunately the post office project represented only a temporary relief measure and did not measurably decrease unemployment or stimulate local growth. However, it did represent a turning point in Rogers' career. The architect had received no commissions since 1931, and was close to declaring bankruptcy of his small firm. After his successful entry into the competition for Onetown's post office, he was awarded several commissions for Federal buildings in Your State, and eventually went to Washington to join the staff of the Public Buildings Branch of the Procurement Division of the Treasury Department.

The Onetown Post Office is a small brick building. It conforms to the standard plans published by the Treasury Department. Its facade is of simplified classical design

with ornamental metalwork in the three window bays which is typical of Rogers' work. While the building is similar in scale and material to the predominately brick commercial district, its corner site on the road entering the downtown gives it a prominent place in the community.

The Onetown Post Office continues to serve as a postal facility, and for a time housed the local selective service offices. Local newspaper articles reflect that its construction symbolized hope for economic recovery in the community and renewed local faith in the Federal Government. One of few buildings constructed during the depression in Onetown, it exemplifies the contribution of Government building programs to the building environment in Any State and represents the architecture of this period.