

City of Madison Landmarks Commission
LANDMARKS AND LANDMARK SITES NOMINATION FORM (1)

Name of Building or Site

Common Name

Madison Municipal Building

Historic Name (if applicable)

U.S. Post Office and Courthouse

Location

Street Address

215 Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd.
Madison, WI 53709

Aldermanic District

Six

Classification

Type of Property (building, monument, park, etc.)

Building

Zoning District

C4

Present Use

Government offices and post office

Current Owner of Property (available at City Assessor's Office)

Name(s)

City of Madison
Mark Olinger, Director
Department of Planning and Development

Street Address

215 Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd.

Telephone Number

266-4635

Legal Description (available at City Assessor's Office)

Parcel Number

0709-242-0701-6

Legal Description

All Block 88, Original Plat

Condition of Property

Physical Condition (excellent, good, fair, deteriorated, ruins)

Excellent

Altered or Unaltered?

Altered

Moved or Original Site?

Original site

Wall Construction

Masonry

City of Madison
LANDMARKS AND LANDMARK SITES NOMINATION FORM (2)

Historical Data

Original Owner
U.S. Government

Original Use
Post Office and Courthouse

Architect or Builder
James A. Wetmore

Architectural Style
Neo-Classical Revival

Date of Construction
1927-29; between 1942-1959; 1979-82

Indigenous Materials Used
Not applicable

List of Bibliographical References Used

Blumenson, John J.-G. *Identifying American Architecture*. Nashville, Tennessee: American Association for State and Local History, 1977.

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Flad and Associates. Plans for Remodeling, June 1979.

Flad and Associates. Specifications for Courtroom Remodeling, May 1986.

Grosvenor, Beth. *How to Apply National Register Criteria to Post Offices*. Washington, D.C.: National Park Service National Register Bulletin 13, 1994.

Map of Madison, Wisconsin. Pelham, New York: Sanborn Publishing Company, 1942, pasted over through 1959.

Master Builder. 1928.

Mollenhoff, David V. *Madison: A History of the Formative Years*. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Co., 1982.

Rankin, Katherine H. *Intensive Survey of the Historic Resources of Madison*. Prepared for the Madison Department of Planning and Development and the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1994.

Wisconsin State Journal. 1929.

Withey, Henry F. and Elsie Rathburn Withey. *Biographical Dictionary of American Architects (Deceased)*. Los Angeles: Hennessy and Ingalls, 1970.

Wyatt, Barbara L., editor. *Cultural Resource Management in Wisconsin*. Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1986.

Form Prepared By

Name and Title

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Madison, WI 53701

Telephone Number

266-6552

Date Nomination Form Was Prepared

February 2001.

Landmarks Commission

LANDMARKS AND LANDMARK SITES NOMINATION FORM (3)

Describe Present and Original Physical Construction and Appearance.

Introduction

The U.S. Post Office and Federal Courthouse (hereafter, Post Office), located at 215 Martin Luther King Boulevard, was erected in 1927-1929.¹ James A. Wetmore, then Acting Supervising Architect for the U.S. Treasury Department, oversaw the design of the building.² Madison's Post Office is a Neo-Classical Revival building finished with limestone ashlar veneer. A parapet hides the flat, built-up roof. A non-contributing loading dock addition, appended to the rear of the Post Office, was constructed sometime between 1942 and 1959.³ The Post Office property includes one non-contributing object. This is the 1993 Martin Luther King Junior Memorial, a sculpture that stands at the southwest corner of the property.

Setting

The Post Office occupies one city block between the Capitol Square and the Monona Terrace Convention Center. The Post Office, now known as the Municipal Building, faces the City-County Building across Martin Luther King Boulevard. An open parking lot lies to the rear of the building. Sidewalks ring the property.

Description

The Post Office is composed of the 1927-1929 rectangular main block and a non-contributing loading dock addition appended to the rear of the main block. The main block of the Post Office measures about 205 feet along the front (Martin Luther King Boulevard) and 120 feet along the sides. It is composed of a U-shaped section, with the open end facing to the rear (east), and a one-story section that is inserted into the U at the rear of the building. The U-shaped section is three stories tall on a partially raised basement. It is of steel reinforced brick construction with limestone veneer. The one-story insert section is finished with cream brick and is original to the structure. Centered to the rear of the main block is the non-contributing loading dock, erected sometime between 1942 and 1959. The loading dock is finished with cream brick and has a flat, built-up roof. The loading dock measures 50 feet (north-south) by 75 feet and replaced an earlier, smaller loading dock.

¹ *The Master Builder*, October 1928, p. 28.

² Building inscription, dated 1927.

³ *Map of Madison*, (Pelham, New York: Sanborn Publishing Company, 1942, pasted over through 1959).

Limestone ashlar veneer appears on the west- (front), north- and south-facing facades of the Post Office. It is rusticated up to the level of the first floor windows and enriched with a limestone water table, limestone belt courses beneath the first floor windows and between the first and second floors, and, above the third floor, a stone entablature. The entablature features a dentil molding and a projecting cornice surmounted by a balustraded parapet. Throughout the building, the basement and first floor windows have been replaced with dark aluminum windows holding fixed panes of dark glass. On the second and third floors, the original metal multipane windows have been retained. Most of these are casements.

A central projecting section 13 bays wide featuring two-story Ionic columns dominates the front (west-facing) facade. A one-bay section flanks either side of the central projecting section. In the central section, at basement level, a concrete retaining wall about 5 feet from the building lets light into the basement windows. A short flight of granite steps leads from the walkway up to the main entrance, composed of three doorways centered on the first floor. Each opening has a stone surround, featuring a narrow molding with raised flowers, floral corner blocks and a lintel enriched with a shield and a series of elongated S-shapes. Deeply set within each doorway is a pair of modern, black, metal-and-glass doors with simple chrome hardware. The doors are set in a metal frame enriched with fluted pilasters and a denticulated cornice, surmounted by a transom with a black metal grille. At the second and third floors in the central section, the windows are recessed between simple two-story Ionic columns. Each column has a plain base and capital. Between each pair of columns, the second- and third-story windows are united within a frame enriched with fluted pilasters and a denticulated cornice. The windows themselves are multipane, in three parts. The second-story windows are tall, with a Roman window motif in each corner. The third-story windows are shorter. On either side of the central projecting section, the flanking bay displays the same first-story window as the central section, but at the second story, a round-arched multipane window with a plain stone cornice and a prominent scrolled keystone appears. Above this window is a stone panel enriched with swags. At the third floor in each of the flanking bays, the window opening holds three multipane casements.

The north- and south-facing facades are similar to the front facade, except that the central projecting section is five bays wide, and the entrance is in the western flanking bay. These side entrances are each composed of a single doorway with either one pair of doors (south), or one large door and one sidelight (north). The transoms and surrounds are configured and ornamented like those on the front facade. On the rear façade of the U-section, the outer bay is stone, identical to the flanking bays on the other facades. The rest of the rear façade of the U-section, that is, the one-story insert within the U, is of cream brick.

The transition is marked with stone quoining. Within the U, most of the windows are metal, four-over-four, double-hung sash with stone sills. There are two sets of three of these windows on the north and south-facing walls within the U. In the center of the east-facing wall within the U, there are five round-arched multi-pane windows. There is a small blind bull's-eye between each pair of windows. On either side of this are six four-over-four double-hung sash.

The loading dock addition is utilitarian in appearance. On each of the north- and south-facing

facades of the loading dock, replacement doors and windows appear. Both sides incorporate a full-façade, wide-eaved, cutaway porch, designed for mail trucks. There are no openings on the east-facing facade of this section.

The interior construction consists of concrete-encased steel columns and beams, which support concrete floors and brick partition walls. Originally, the interior floor plan consisted of a central U-shaped corridor, except in the basement. In the basement, there were storage rooms, restrooms and a large, open work space for mail carriers arranged along two parallel corridors. On the first floor, there was a public lobby across the front of the building. A large, workroom took up most of the space on this floor, separated from the lobby by postal service windows and post office boxes. The lobby featured ceramic tile flooring, green marble baseboards, and beige marble wainscot. The workroom had light wood wainscot. The basement and first floor were gutted in 1979 after the City of Madison purchased the building. New office space was created for various City departments on those floors, while the second and third floor plans and finishes were retained. This remodeling was completed in 1982. The Madison firm of Flad and Associates prepared the remodeling plans.⁴ The basement floor plan now consists of a corridor with several branches. There are various small rooms, and one very large room with short, moveable partitions. The loading dock section, originally the postal inspection workroom, was remodeled to provide additional office and meeting space in 1993. On the first floor, there is a large central lobby with a branch corridor on the north, and several large spaces with moveable partitions. On the first floor and in the basement, the floors are concrete, finished with rubberized tile in the corridors and restrooms, and carpet everywhere else. The walls are plastered and the ceiling fitted with acoustical tile and fluorescent lights. During the 1979-1982 remodeling, the building's two staircases were enclosed. The staircases are located at the northwest and southwest corners of the building. Each is a dog-leg concrete staircase with white marble treads and a wood handrail. The northwest staircase wraps around an elevator.

The second and third floor plans and finishes are relatively intact. On the second floor, there are offices and a large courtroom arranged along the central corridor. The corridor has white hexagonal tile flooring with a marble edge and green marble baseboard. The corridor walls are finished with paneled, wood wainscot; there is smooth plaster above. The corridor also has a plastered, beamed ceiling, enriched with classical moldings. The doorway into each office features a wood classical surround, enclosing a one-light transom, and a paneled wood door with opaque glass in the upper half. The offices themselves are carpeted, and have plastered walls and ceilings. The courtroom is on the east side of the corridor. It is intact and elaborately decorated. Two sets of double doors lead into the courtroom. Each set has a classical surround with a denticulated cornice. Within each is a second set of doors. These are wood swinging doors encased in metal-studded leather. Inside the courtroom, the door surrounds feature fluted pilasters and an entablature with guttae, surmounted by a cartouche. The wall treatment consists of a series of paneled pilasters and an entablature with metopes. On the south end of the room, paneled wainscot appears. In the center of this wall, two pairs of fluted pilasters support a semi-circular pediment. In the center of the pediment is a cartouche with scales symbolizing justice. The pediment is further enriched with dentils, egg-and-dart and floral moldings. Below is the door into the judge's chambers (now a storage room). The

⁴ Flad and Associates, plans for remodeling, June 1979.

judge's bench sits in front of this door. The bench is imposing, and is decorated with two large cartouches, each with the scales of justice. Although there are suspended ceiling and light systems in the courtroom, the original ceiling can easily be seen above. Corbels enriched with acanthus leaves appear to support the plastered ceiling beams. Wooden benches for the public have also been retained. In 1986, the courtroom was renovated into a multi-use facility for CitiCable. The plans, by Flad and Associates, included a television studio, control room, storage and office space. The jury box, fixed seating and Clerk's desk and platform were removed. New gypsum board partitions were installed in the office area. New suspended ceilings, carpeting, electrical and heating and ventilating systems were installed in the office and studio area.⁵

The third floor is simpler. Tile and marble flooring are found in the corridor and the walls and ceilings are plastered. The offices exhibit dropped acoustical tile ceilings, and carpeting or asphalt tile flooring. Most of the building has fluorescent lighting, although there are a few original incandescent fixtures, composed of opaque globes either mounted on the ceiling (third floor) or suspended on chains (second floor). Other original fixtures that remain are the toilets, sinks and stalls in the second and third floor restrooms, and a porcelain drinking fountain on the third floor.

Non-Contributing Resource: the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial

The memorial is a concrete marker about ten feet high and features a bronze bust of Martin Luther King surrounded by six sculptured bronze panels. It was erected in 1993 and so is not yet old enough to contribute to the significance of the Post Office.

Alterations

The integrity of the Post Office has been affected by the 1979-1982 remodeling. On the exterior, the dark, fixed replacement windows are incompatible with the building. The first floor and basement have been gutted, losing all integrity. However, the second and third floors are intact. While the alterations do detract from the building's architectural character, enough of the original appearance has been retained to lend the Post Office architectural significance as a fine local example of Neo-Classical Revival design, one of the two best representatives of this style in Madison (the other being the State Historical Society Library at 816 State Street)

⁵ Flad and Associates, specifications for courtroom remodeling, May 1986.

City of Madison Landmarks Commission
LANDMARKS AND LANDMARK SITES NOMINATION FORM (4)

Significance of Nominated Property and Conformance to Designation Criteria.

The U.S. Post Office and Federal Courthouse is eligible for Madison Landmark designation under criterion 3 of the Landmarks and Landmarks Sites Designation Criteria. It is one of Madison's finest examples of the Neo-Classical Revival style, and retains very good integrity, especially on the exterior.

History of the Post Office in Madison

The first post office in what would become the City of Madison was established in 1837 in Eben Peck's log cabin on South Butler Street (demolished). Later in 1837, Simeon Mills erected a log building (demolished) at the northeast corner of East Main Street and South Webster Streets, opening Madison's first store. Mills became postmaster and moved the post office into his building. In 1838, Mills erected a frame store (demolished) on the same site, where the post office was housed until 1840. In 1840, attorney David Brigham was named postmaster and moved the post office into a structure (demolished) on the east side of the 100-block of South Butler Street, where his law offices were located. The next postmaster, Steptoe Catlin (1843-1845), kept the post office in a building (demolished) on the west side of the 100-block of King Street. From 1845 until 1848, postmaster David Holt, Jr. ran the post office out of an edifice (demolished) at the north end of King Street. The next postmaster, Chauncey Abbott, moved the post office to another building (demolished) on King Street. From 1853 until 1856, postmaster John N. Jones kept the post office in a structure (demolished) on South Pinckney Street. Jones relocated the post office into the Van Bergen block at 120-128 South Pinckney Street (demolished 1999) in 1856. The post office remained in the Van Bergen block until 1871, when the first building erected specifically for Madison's post office was completed. Begun in 1867, this building was located at 4 East Mifflin Street and also housed the Western Wisconsin Branch of the U.S. Court, which was formed in 1870. The first U.S. Post Office and Federal Courthouse served its original purpose until 1929, when the building that is the subject of this nomination was ready for occupancy⁶

Madison's Postmaster W.A. Devine recommended a new post office and federal courthouse as early as 1912. World War I intervened. In 1920, the present site on Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard (then Monona Avenue) was selected, and all of Block 88 was purchased at a cost of \$336,448. The new U.S. Post Office and Federal Courthouse cost about \$1 million to build. James A. Wetmore, Acting Supervising Architect for the Department of the Treasury, oversaw the project.⁷ The St. Louis firm of Murch Brothers was the general contractor.⁸ The city's first

⁶ Katherine H. Rankin, *Intensive Survey of the Historic Resources of Madison*, prepared for the Madison Department of Planning and Development and the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1994, no page numbers; and "Post Office was Moved 8 Times in 92 Years," *Capital Times*, (Ct), February 1929, Newspaper Clipping Files, Madison Public Library.

⁷ Building Inscription

⁸ "City Ready to Dedicate Post Office", *Wisconsin State Journal*, February 14, 1929.

U.S. Post Office and Federal Courthouse was demolished after this one was built. All eight of the other buildings that housed the post office in Madison prior to 1871 have been demolished.

From 1929 until 1980, the main branch of the post office occupied the building on Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard. A new edifice was erected on Milwaukee Street to serve as the main branch of the post office in 1980. The City of Madison then acquired the building on Martin Luther King Boulevard and remodeled the basement and first floor for municipal office. Although the federal court remained in the building into the 1980s, it has been known as the Madison Municipal Building since 1980.

Architectural Significance

The Post Office is architecturally significant as a fine local example of the Neo-Classical Revival Style. Its integrity has been affected by the 1979-1982 remodeling, which gutted the first floor and basement, and saw the installation of incompatible replacement windows on the same floors. However, architectural significance is concerned primarily with exterior integrity and the fact that the replacement windows were installed in the original openings reduces their impact. In all, the integrity of the Post Office is more than sufficient to convey its architectural significance.

The Neo-Classical Revival Style was inspired by the 1893 Chicago World Columbian Exposition. Build between 1895 and 1935, Neo-Classical Revival is characterized by formal compositions with a symmetrical façade, monumental columns (Greek order), and decorated moldings, entablatures and cornices surmounted by a parapet, attic story or balustrade.⁹ Madison's Post Office incorporates all these elements. According to Wyatt, this style was particularly popular for civic and institutional buildings and banks.¹⁰

The Neo-Classical Revival style and stone finish of Madison's Post Office was mandated by the U.S. Department of the Treasury. National Register Bulletin 13, *How to Apply National Register Criteria to Post Office*, states that, during the tenure of James Knox Taylor (Supervising Architect of the Treasury from 1897 to 1912), the federal government began promoting the concept that governmental buildings should be monumental and beautiful. This description is almost synonymous with classical style. In response, Taylor showed a preference for Neo-Classical Revival and Colonial Revival in post office design. Under Taylor, classical post offices, many of them individually designed, were build all over the United States. The 1913 Public Buildings Act authorized the construction of a large number of public buildings. In the interest of economy and efficiency, the Department of the Treasury instituted a classification system under which a post office's structural and ornamental quality were functions of the value of real estate and postal receipts in the city where it was to be located. First class post offices in large cities would still be monumental and elaborate. First class post offices were further divided into subclasses A and B, and the materials to be used in each specified. For subclass B post office,

⁹ John J.G. Blumenson, *Identifying American Architecture*, (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1977), p. 67.

¹⁰ Barbara L. Wyatt, editor, *Cultural Resource Management in Wisconsin*, (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1986), II: 2-18.

such as Madison's, federal regulations specified a limestone or sandstone facing; fireproof construction' exterior frames and sash of metal; interior frames, sash and doors of wood; interior finishes to exclude the more expensive woods and marbles; and restricted ornament in public spaces. In addition, post offices were no longer designed individually. Instead, the Supervising Architect's office used the same designs and floor plans whenever possible. This continued until the early 1930s.¹¹

The Supervising Architect of the Department of Treasury, James Wetmore, oversaw the design and construction of Madison's Post Office. James A. Wetmore (1863 – 1940) was born and educated in New York State. He began work in Washington, D.C. as a court stenographer. Wetmore was associated with the Department of Treasury for 45 years, during which time at least 2,000 buildings were designed in his office. He retired in the 1930s. Wetmore's contribution to architecture in the U.S. has not been evaluated, nor is it known how many other post offices in the country were built using plans similar to the Madison Post Office.¹²

Several other buildings in Madison display Neo-Classical Revival styling. The best commercial examples are the Bank of Madison (1 West Main Street, 1917-1919 with an addition in 1929-1930), with its two-story columns across the front, and the Bank of Wisconsin Branch (502 State Street, 1929-1930) with applied one-story pilasters. Another fine example of the style is the Masonic Temple at Wisconsin Avenue (1923-25), featuring a massive design with four two-story columns in antis on the front façade. The Bank of Madison, Bank of Wisconsin Branch and Masonic Temple were all designed by the Madison architectural firm of Law, Law and Potter. In comparison with these buildings, the Post Office is more high style than the banks, and more refined and elegant than the Masonic Temple. The Post Office retains more than enough integrity to convey its architectural significance.

It should be noted that Madison boasts two outstanding Beaux Arts buildings: the Wisconsin State Capitol (1907-1919, National Historic Landmark) and the State Historical Society of Wisconsin (1900, NRHP). Because they are of the more elaborate and grand Beaux Arts variant of classicism, they do not provide good comparisons for the Post Office.

From this comparison, it is clear that the Madison Municipal Building is architecturally significant as an excellent example in Madison of the Neo-Classical Revival style.

¹¹ Beth Grosvenor, *How to Apply National Register Criteria to Post Offices*, (Washington, D.C.: National Park Service National Register Bulletin 13, 1994), pp. 3 and 14.

¹² Henry F. Withey and Elsie Rathburn Withey, *Biographical Dictionary of American Architects (Deceased)*, (Los Angeles: Hennessy and Ingalls, 1970), p. 467.

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