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The FB, USPO, and CT was built in 1933, to provide a courtroom and office space for the U.S. District Court, jail space and a Post Office. There also was office space for the U.S. Commissioners, Alaska Communications System (Government-owned telephone and radio), the Agriculture Extension Service, the Weather Bureau, and Internal Revenue Service.

The project was performed under the auspices of the Public Works Branch of the Department of the Treasury. The design, generally in the Art Deco style, is a good example of Federal architecture of the period. George N. Ray, a prominent architect in Washington, D.C., designed the building for the Treasury Department while James A. Wetmore was Acting Supervisory Architect.⁴ Mr. Ray, 1889–1959, was in partnership with Clarke Waggaman when he designed the Rust Building and Riggs National Bank buildings in Washington, D.C. and the Federal Building in Fairbanks.³ He was noted for designing the prestigious homes along Massachusetts Avenue.⁴ In 1931, Mr. Ray joined the real estate firm of Randall H. Hagner and Company as a sales manager.⁵ He supervised remodeling efforts for converting brownstone residences along Connecticut Avenue into commercial space.

Before construction of the Fairbanks FB was complete, Louis A. Simon became Supervisory Architect. The building blueprints were dated 1931, and Mr. Simon was appointed in 1932. Mr. Simon was a successful architect who had designed the Roosevelt Library at Hyde Park and had represented the Treasury Department in the development of the Federal Triangle before his appointment.⁶ While with Treasury, he studied European government buildings and influenced the design of the Archives Building, designed by John Russell Pope. Mr. Simon was a strong advocate of American Colonial architecture in government buildings. His associates said that perhaps no other American exerted as much influence on design of courthouses, post offices and other government structures as he did.⁷

The contractor was William MacDonald, whose "experiences read like a page out of the Arabian Nights — a man of character whose word is as good as his bond and whose reputation for sincerity and honesty . . . is a byword in the construction industry." MacDonald was a Scot who, after his apprenticeship, came to the United States with \$4.50 in his jeans. He worked for several contractors, then struck out on his own. "Mac" specialized in the construction of schools, post offices and other government buildings.⁸ The Federal Building in Fairbanks was, in 1939, the furthest north reinforced concrete building in the world. "Mac" also built the Federal Building at Nome, Alaska.



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DESCRIPTION CONTINUATION SHEET

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When constructed, the Federal Building was an example of the most modern design and construction material of the time. It is rectangular, 128 feet by 92 feet, with three full floors and small fourth and fifth floor penthouse-type areas. The roof above the courtroom is copper. There is a full basement.

The facades of this structure consist of repetitive bays separated by pilasters created from rectangular wall projections which project from the top of the basement wall level. The pilasters are decorated with double V-shaped grooved ornaments present on the top floor portion of each individual facade. The grooved ornaments again exist along the spandrel above the windows on the top floor, here occurring in groups of three.

The space encased by the pilasters, separating the windows from one floor to the other, are sheathed with aluminum panels as are the metal covered parapets in each of the window bays. This occurs on all four sides with the exception that on the side facades, the outer bays have aluminum between windows and are also missing the typical grooved ornaments of the top floor found elsewhere on the structure.

The front facade facing Cushman Street features three window bays on each side of the central (set back) section, which again consists of three bays. All the bays are made up of two, side by side double-hung windows on each floor. (The two exceptions to this throughout the structure are the first floor windows which have an additional top-hung sash of two lights, and the basement fenestration consisting of smaller two light casement windows which were once covered with wrought-iron.) On the central section of this facade is a projecting one-story vestibule which has three entrance doors.

The side facades have a central section of five bays with windows and details similar to those in the front facade. The two outer bays, however, have only single double-hung windows and have no grooved decorations above the top floor fenestration.

The rear facade on Turner Street is similar to the front facade but it has a margins metal roof over the first floor of the central portion, covering a small entrance door and a mechanically lifted door used for deliveries. 9

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"Before 1927, every building in Fairbanks was built of wood because people were afraid a concrete structure would crumble when the temperature dropped to 50 or 60 degrees below zero. In the summer of 1927, however, Cap Lathrop, the multi-millionaire who owned half of Fairbanks and was the richest man in the territory, decided to build the best movie theatre in Alaska." Lathrop built the 55 feet high Empress Theatre with solid concrete walls, calling it his "gift to Alaska."¹⁰ The Federal Building, built just six years later, was one of the first concrete buildings in Alaska. A professional journal of the time advised that "better methods of concrete quality control have done much

to insure the durability of monolithic concrete buildings, even when subjected to most severe exposure." Forms were constructed of unlined wood, using one inch by six inch sheathing. After stripping the forms, the concrete was lightly rubbed with carborundum bricks, but not sufficiently to remove the grain marks left by the form boards. The double V-shaped grooved ornament in the pilasters and in the spandrels above the top story windows was formed in the concrete by nailing V strips to the forms.¹¹

The use of aluminum panels was also unusual for Alaska. The metal was introduced to the public in 1855, but was not commercially practical until after 1886.¹² The Federal Building has cast aluminum spandrel panels and a cast aluminum-covered parapet in each window bay. The entrance has cast aluminum doors and aluminum transom grills cast in the shape of an eagle. There are verde antique marble panels above these doors. The original four large wall-mounted lanterns beside the entry doors were also of cast aluminum. They have been replaced.

Inside the building, there are marble steps leading from vestibule to lobby level. The floor and wall finish throughout the building, except in the courtroom and jail, is terrazzo floors with marble border and base, and plaster walls and ceiling. Supporting the high ceiling of the first floor postal lobby are wood pilasters. Under the postal windows is wood wainscot. Above these windows is wrought iron grillwork. The lock boxes and building directories are bronze. The elevator door is hollow metal and there are hollow metal headers above the stairwell doorcases.

The south wing of the second floor originally was a jail, but in 1969, the area was converted to offices. Jail area walls are salt glazed hollow tile. There is a separate, narrow stairway from the second floor jail space to the third floor courtroom.

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Courtroom walls are panelled partly with wood and finished above with sound insulating material. There is an ornate plaster coffer ceiling in a grid network. In the center of each square grid is a plaster rosette. Around the edge of each grid is a plaster egg and dart design.

The basement was flooded in the severe flood of 1967, but has been repaired. 13



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SPECIFIC DATES	1933	BUILDER/ARCHITECT	Department	of	the	Treasury
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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

". . . a modern federal buil ding and post office, by far the most imposing block in town." Such was the description of the Fairbanks Federal Building (FB) by an author/traveler in 1944.¹⁴ A 1941, author also found the structure "imposing."¹⁵ That can still be said, for in 1977, the FB is still one of the largest buildings in downtown Fairbanks and is very distinctive in its architecture. The building occupies the entire block bounded by Turner and Cushman Streets, and Second and Third Avenues.

The Federal Building site was a part of E. T. Barnette's Trading Post. When the sternwheeler LaVelle Young could go no further upstream, its captain unloaded Barnette and his \$20,000 worth of trading goods in late August of 1901. In a conversation with District Court Judge James Wickersham, Barnette agreed to name his post "Fairbanks" after Senator Charles Fairbanks of Indiana, Wickersham's political benefactor. Barnette laid out his ten acre trading site, bounded roughly by Third and First Avenues, Cushman and Cowles Streets, in 1902, after Felix Pedro discovered gold. In the spring of 1903, a townsite plat was drawn. Wickersham named two of the major streets after U.S. Representatives Cushman and Lacey.¹⁶ The Federal Building is located on Second and Cushman.

"James Wickersham's greatest gift to Fairbanks was the FB-PO and CT. When Wickersham officially moved his court from Eagle on the Yukon River to the Tanana Valley in 1904, he built a courthouse and federal jail on Cushman Street on a plot of ground donated by E. T. Barnette. Long time Fairbanksans have always said that the only reason Fairbanks beat out Chena City," a rival pioneer town which had a better location for steamboat traffic, was because of the government offices. Wickersham's first courthouse was a wood frame building which burned down in 1906. His second was loosely constructed and "should (have been) condemned by any conscientious building inspector," according to an engineer asked by the Grand Jury to inspect the building. ¹⁷

The jail was built on the corner of Third and Cushman in 1903. About in the middle of where the Federal Building now stands was the jail yard where the hangings took place. The first person ever sentenced to die



9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

See continuation sheets, pages 17 through 19.

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SIGNIFICANCE CONTINUATION SHEET

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on this spot was a man named Vuko Perovich, who was found guilty of murder. A high scaffold was built, next to the little log jail, and it stood there so long it became known as Perovich's "Two Story House," which was waiting for him as soon as he stopped appealing his conviction. President Taft stopped his execution in 1909, and the scaffold was torn down.¹⁸

Judge Bunnell sentenced three men to die in 1919, 1920, and 1921. From the second floor of the old wooden courthouse a walkway was built to the empty bank building next door on the east side of Turner Street. They cut a trapdoor in the middle and built a frame over it to hold the rope.¹⁹

In 1906, the whole business section of Fairbanks was burned and the FB-CT was hurriedly constructed to replace the burned building. The general understanding was that it was constructed almost entirely of green lumber.²⁰ As a result of the poor foundation (wood posts set on mud sills), the building was "warping and twisting out of shape, while the floors are sagging and stresses and strains are introduced for which the building was not designed." Some of the bearing wall partitions were removed without replacing the structural load. The water closets were in the center of the building with no ventilation except through adjoining offices.²¹ Congressman Dan Sutherland forwarded an engineering report in March 1928, to the Secretary of the Treasury requesting a new building.²² A subsequent study in July 1929, by the Office of the Supervising Architect, recommended a new building be constructed "large enough to contain the Post Office and the Telegraph Office on the ground floor, and that the foundations be built so that one additional story can be built if necessary."23 Presumably the Court activities would also be housed on the first floor. Pressure for a new building increased. District Court Judge Clegg, in December 1929, telegraphed Congressman Sutherland to report the second fire in the smokestack, the first of which destroyed part of the judge's chambers and the library.²⁴ Following that appeal, in February 1930, a resolution was adopted by the Seattle Chamber of Commerce urging immediate construction of a new Federal Building. The resolution referred to Federal approval of the project and completed plans and estimates.²⁵ The Treasury Department responded in February 1930: "While an amount (of money) has been set aside in the public building program for Fairbanks, the project has not yet been specifically authorized by Congress."²⁶ It was in January 1931, that architect George N. Ray was commissioned²⁷ and the total allowable budget (\$420,000) for construction was announced.²⁸ Fairbanks contractors were queried by the Customs collector about recommended building practices.²⁹ The Federal Building was one of the first concrete structures in Alaska. Architect Ray, upon completion of the plans, wrote to the Treasury Department asking that he be given special consideration in future work because he had lost money on the Fairbanks project.³⁰

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A contractor in Seattle complained about the extensive specification for aluminum on the Fairbanks building instead of iron and steel forgings, cut stone, bronze or brass work. He believed that this was to help the aluminum trust. The Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce asked the Treasury to respond to those charges.³¹ Assistant Secretary Ferry K. Heath assured the Committee that the Treasury Department's policy was to "spread the benefits of the building program over as wide a variety of materials as good architectural practice would permit." Aluminum is cheaper than bronze and its freedom from corrosion gives it a considerable advantage over steel. Two bids were called for with the Fairbanks building, one based on the use of less costly materials. It was that bid, specifying wood sash in lieu of steel sash, wood trim in lieu of bronze in the lobby, and wood doors to lobby offices, which was awarded to William MacDonald Construction Company, St. Louis, Missouri, on March 19, 1932.³²

Because of an error in computing freight rates on steel and cement, the bid award was delayed from February to March 1932. The William MacDonald Company successfully argued that even with the higher bid based on corrected freight rates, their bid would be lower than other bids and they should be awarded the contract. Delays in construction because of rebidding was also a salient factor.³³

The FB was dedicated August 13, 1934, by Fairbanks Mayor E. B. Collins, Alaskan Congressional Delegate Anthony J. Dimond, and Second Assistant Postmaster General Harlee Branch. The Mayor "made appropriate remarks concerning the beauty and utility of the building."³⁴ Mr. Dimond "spoke upon the value of the structure to the people of Fairbanks and the government, its symbol as evidence of the unity of the people and the power of the nation."³⁵ He also praised the Post Office Department for their "sympathetic considerations of the problems of Alaska." Mr. Branch remarked "upon the dignity and stateliness of the structure and its testimony to the might of the country."³⁶

The Federal Building was not built until 1933, but because it symbolizes the Federal government presence in Fairbanks, the history of Federal activities in Fairbanks before 1933, is also its history. Alaska's history is so "young" that a brief summary of the transition of government is necessary for perspective. When the purchase of Alaska was completed in 1867, there were no civil or criminal laws and no system of courts. Between the date of the purchase and 1884, the possession had been governed in turn by the army, customs service, and the navy. The army and navy rule were preferable, because of the military influence

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over the Indians, who sought to redress their grievances of confiscated lands. The 1884 Organic Act providing for civil government created the District of Alaska, allowed appointment of officials, established the capital at Sitka (the Russian capital), provided a system of courts and a civil and criminal code, and made the laws of Oregon applicable to Alaska. The District Judge appointed was Ward McAllister, Jr.³⁷ Subsequently Alaska was divided into four judicial districts to allow the judge or commissioner to "get around" once a year to settle mining claims.³⁸ These special sessions were held at such times and places as necessary. On these so-called "floating courts," the entire court, with jurymen and lawyers, embarked on a revenue cutter (boat) and traveled from place to place holding court either on the cutter or in local buildings. Convicted prisoners were carried to the nearest jail.³⁹ In winter the judge traveled by dog team.⁴⁰

In 1900, the capital was transferred to Juneau. In 1901, President Roosevelt appointed James Wickersham a federal district judge to "clear up corruption in the district." Wickersham established court at Eagle on the Yukon.⁴¹ In 1904, he moved court to Fairbanks and the Federal Building site. Fairbanks soon divided into opposing factions for and against his policies. Roosevelt gave him five recess appointments, insisting that "as long as I am President of the United States, Wickersham shall be judge in Alaska."⁴² However, the judge's strong personality led to a rift with appointed Governor Hoggatt, which resulted in his resignation from the bench in 1907.

In 1906, the Alaska Delegate Act was passed and Judge Wickersham, a strong advocate of home rule, was elected the first territorial delegate. He initiated legislation which, in 1912, created the territorial legislature.⁴³

After Judge Wickersham left the bench, there were eight other judges who sat in the Territorial Court. Royal A. Gunnison, Silas H. Reid, and Thomas R. Lyons assisted until 1910, when Peter D. Overfield was appointed. These early judges were very involved in politics. Cornelius D. Murane, who sat at the Fairbanks court in 1912, began his career in Nome as a mining lawyer and was the local choice for a territorial delegate.⁴⁴ The next judge, Frederick E. Fuller, resigned in 1914,⁴⁵ at which time young Charles Earnest Bunnell, a scholarly attorney from Valdez who had run unsuccessfully against Wickersham for delegate to Congress, was appointed. But he had earned the enmity of Wickersham, who contrived to delay his reappointment to the bench. Bunnell served until 1921, on recess appointments and then, ironically, was selected to organize and head an institution which was the brainchild of his political foe,

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Wickersham.⁴⁶ The territorial college, later to become the University of Alaska, opened in 1922, with six students and six faculty. The college was the legislature's consolation prize to Fairbanks for having lost the territorial capital to Juneau. That this college developed into a university in the face of great obstacles was due to the courage and labor of its first president.⁴⁷

Succeeding Bunnell were Judges Cecil H. Clegg (1921-1932), first judge to occupy the new FB-CT, E. Coke Hill (1932-1935), Harry E. Pratt (1935-1954), and Vernon D. Forbes (1954-1960). On Saturday, February 20, 1960, the District Court for the District of Alaska was defunct; Alaska had won statehood.⁴⁸

Although the Courts dominated the Federal scene, the Post Office, another tenant of the Federal Building, was equally important in Fairbanks' and Alaska's history. The small population and the rudimentary nature of transportation systems in the early 1900's, indicate the need for and difficulty with mail service. In 1886, the District Governor recommended that mail delivery to Alaska be increased to "at least semimonthly."49 The monthly mail service from the States originated in Port Townsend, Washington Territory, and served only Wrangell-Killisnoo, Juneau and Sitka. The Governor contended it should be extended monthly to Kodiak and Unalaska. Transportation between the States and the original Alaska capital, Sitka, was by way of San Francisco on a steamer connecting at Port Townsend with the Pacific Coast Steamship Company's monthly vessel to southeastern Alaska. With that service it was impossible to communicate with the authorities in the national capital and have a reply in less than three months. The Post Office Department in Washington, D.C. was not cooperative. When the agents for the steamship company announced fortnightly runs, the Post Office deemed it "inadvisable to increase the (postal) service."⁵⁰ In 1891, a mail boat service was established on a part-year basis between southeastern and western Alaska, but no passengers were allowed.⁵¹

In 1901, army engineers opened a pack trail from Valdez, on the southern coast, to Fairbanks. In 1907, the Alaskan Road Commission widened the pack trail to make it passable by horse-drawn sleds in winter, when the rivers were frozen over. In 1913, the first automobile crossed the Richardson Trail from Valdez to Fairbanks. In 1923, a railroad was

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built from the coast to the Interior.⁵² The population in Fairbanks at this time was 1,158. A stage route to Fairbanks from Cordova was usable only in summer. During the open (unfrozen) season on the Yukon River, Fairbanks could be reached by way of Skagway down the Yukon or by way of St. Michael, on the western coast, up the river 1,180 miles.⁵³ Air mail service was imminent, as the New York to Nome flight in 1920, ushered in the air age to Alaska.⁵⁴ In 1924, air mail service was inaugurated from Fairbanks to McGrath on the Kuskokwim River, a distance of 320 miles.⁵⁵ Air carriers in interior Alaska competed with dog teams for mail routes. Not until 1938, was an air route established from Juneau to Fairbanks and another from Seattle to Juneau.⁵⁶ Civilian vehicle travel from the mainland to Fairbanks was not possible until 1948.

Another tenant of the FB since its construction was the Internal Revenue Service. This office, on the first floor, was used periodically by the Juneau agent, who was the "first deputy collector to be established permanently in Alaska."⁵⁷ The Weather Bureau, also a FB tenant, was important to Fairbanks because of its role in promoting safety in commercial aviation and in providing the military with regular weather reports.⁵⁸

Most recent (1977) occupants of the Federal Building were U.S. District Court (including U.S. Marshal, U.S. Attorney, Clerk of Court), U.S. Postal Service, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Veterans Administration, two Senators, a Congressperson, Civil Service Commission, Environmental Protection Agency, and Bureau of Census. The Postal Service will move in 1978, to a renovated grocery store one block southwest of the Federal Building. All other tenants relocated, in 1977, to the new Federal Building at the former Alaska Communications System site at 12th Avenue and the Steese Expressway Bypass.⁵⁹

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Olga Steger, interview on July 20, 1977.



CONTINUATION SHEET

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