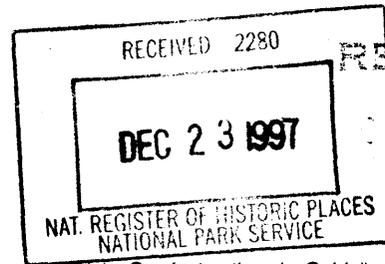


United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service



1664

OHF

National Register of Historic Places  
Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by Marking "X" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Inyo County Courthouse

other names/site number \_\_\_\_\_

2. Location

street & number 168 North Edwards Street

NA  not for publication

city or town Independence

NA  vicinity

state CA code CA county Inyo code 027 zip code 93526

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this  nomination  request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant  nationally  statewide  locally. (  See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

[Signature]  
Signature of certifying official/Title

12/12/97  
Date

State Historic Preservation Officer

State of Federal agency and bureau

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

Signature of commenting or other official/Title

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

entered in the National Register.

See continuation sheet.

determined to be eligible for the National Register.

See continuation sheet.

determined not eligible for the National Register

removed from the National Register.

other, (explain:)

[Signature]  
Signature of the Keeper  
Edson H. Beall

Date of Action

1/23/98

**5. Classification**

**Ownership of Property** (Check as many boxes as apply)      **Category of Property** (Check only one box)

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> private                 | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s) |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> public-local | <input type="checkbox"/> district               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> public-State            | <input type="checkbox"/> site                   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> public-Federal          | <input type="checkbox"/> structure              |
|  | <input type="checkbox"/> object                 |

**Number of Resources within Property**  
(Do no include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	0	buildings
_____	_____	sites
_____	_____	structures
_____	_____	objects
1	0	Total

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

**Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register**

N/A

0

**6. Function or Use**

**Historic Functions**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

government/ county courthouse

**Current Functions**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

government/county courthouse

**7. Description**

**Architectural Classification**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

Neo-Classical Revival

**Materials**  
(enter categories from instructions)

foundations      concrete

walls              concrete

roof                composition

other

**Narrative Description**

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

**8. Statement of Significance**

**Applicable National Register Criteria**

(Mark "X" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or may be likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

**Criteria Considerations**

(Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** removed from its original location.
- C** a birthplace or a grave.
- D** a cemetery.
- E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F** a commemorative property.
- G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance with the past 50 years.

**Narrative Statement of Significance**

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

**9. Major Bibliographic References**

**Bibliography**

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

**Previous documentation on file (NPS):**

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_

**Areas of Significance**

(Enter categories from instructions.)

- \_\_\_\_\_ economics
- \_\_\_\_\_ politics/government
- \_\_\_\_\_ architecture
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

**Period of Significance**

\_\_\_\_\_ 1921 - 1947  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Significant Dates**

\_\_\_\_\_ 1921  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Significant Person**

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

\_\_\_\_\_ N/A

**Cultural Affiliation**

\_\_\_\_\_ N/A  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Architect/Builder**

\_\_\_\_\_ Weeks, William W./McCombs, William & Paul Daniel  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Primary location of additional data:**

- State historic preservation office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of repository:  
\_\_\_\_\_

**10. Geographical Data**

**Acreege of Property** 1.52 acres

**UTM References**

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1	<input type="text" value="11"/>	<input type="text" value="393060"/>	<input type="text" value="4073560"/>
	Zone	Easting	Northing
2	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

3	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
	Zone	Easting	Northing
4	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

See continuation sheet

**Verbal Boundary Description**

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

**Boundary Justification**

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

**11. Form Prepared By**

name/title Judy Triem/historian; Mitch Stone/preservation planner

organization San Buenaventura Research Associates date 7/7/97

street & number 627 E. Pleasant Street telephone (805) 525-1909

city or town Santa Paula state CA zip code 93060

**Additional Documentation**

Submit the following items with the completed form:

**Continuation Sheets**

**Maps**

A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

**Photographs**

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

**Additional Items**

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

**Property Owner**

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

name County of Inyo

street & number 168 N. Edwards Street telephone (619) 878-0292

city or town Independence state CA zip code 93526

**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (19 U.S.C. 470 et. seq.).

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding the burden estimate or any aspect of the form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Projects (1024-0018), Washington DC 20503.

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Continuation Sheet

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Inyo County Courthouse, Inyo County, CA — Narrative Description [continued]

### Summary

The Inyo County Courthouse is a two story, flat-roofed Neo-Classical Revival style public building constructed in 1921 of poured-in-place, reinforced concrete. The courthouse, designed by the architect William H. Weeks, is located on Edwards Street (US Route 395) in Independence, the county seat of Inyo County. The site's designed landscape consists of grass lawns and a variety of mature trees. The courthouse maintains a high degree of integrity of design, materials and workmanship, both on the exterior and in the interior public spaces. The building's integrity of feeling and association remains intact, as does a considerable measure of integrity of setting.

### Physical Description

The Inyo County Courthouse is located on the northern half of a parcel bounded by Edwards Street (US Route 395) to the west, Center Street to the north, Jackson Street to the east and Market Street to the south. The building is rectangular in plan and 127 by 57 feet in overall dimensions oriented on a north-south axis. The site is gently graded towards the east, providing for a half basement to be exposed to a full basement to the side and rear elevations.

The principal, western elevation of the building is symmetrical in composition and consists of two wings flanking a two story neoclassical portico. The window openings on each wing consist of four, tall double-hung, single-pane wood frame windows on the ground floor level with transoms above and four, wood frame double-hung windows on the second story above. Each pair of first and second story windows are slightly inset into the facade and separated by a panel decorated with a simple shield relief design. A fairly shallow projecting cornice line decorated with terra cotta lions-heads spaced at regular intervals and dentil mouldings below defines the unornamented roof parapet above. The western elevation rests on a platform formed by the exposed half-story of the basement. A belt course located between the basement and ground floor windows wraps around the entire building at this height.

The portico is the main visual focus of the building, and establishes its architectural character and style. The portico consists of four massive, Ionic style columns supporting a pediment topped with a shell pattern terra cotta ornament. Located above the column capitals is a simple architrave consisting of three, modestly defined horizontal bands. Within the frieze located above the architrave is the individual lettered sign, "Inyo County Court House." Two figures of reposed women supporting a shield, presumably a symbolic representation of justice, are centered within the tympanum. Dentil mouldings are employed both under the main cornice and under the pediment cornice. The lion-head motif employed elsewhere on the building is continued through the cornice line of the portico.

The columns of the portico are reflected on the building face by four, broad, shallow engaged pilasters. Located between the central pair of pilasters is the main public entrance, consisting of a double door with a fixed transom light above. Flanking the doorway and within the outer pilaster pairs are first and second story window pairs following the pattern established on the flanking wings. A concrete stairway spills out of the portico towards the sidewalk and outdoor public square to the west.

The northern elevation consists of five bays of window openings similar in configuration to the western elevation, with the exception that the ground floor windows substitute single pane sash units with transoms above for the tall windows of the western elevation, and the second floor windows are single pane rather than two-over-two units. These window treatments are used on this and the other less-important building elevations. The basement floor is fully exposed on this elevation, with a single door centered on the elevation flanked by two single pane sash windows. The western-most window on the ground floor is blind. A fire escape stairway constructed of steel and supported by two steel columns is attached to the central window bay on the second floor. The stairway projects slightly beyond the building towards the rear (eastern) elevation.

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**Inyo County Courthouse, Inyo County, CA — Narrative Description [continued]**

The eastern elevation of the courthouse is essentially a reflection of the western elevation, with the notable exception of the portico feature, the complete exposure of the basement floor, and the window treatments, which are similar to the northern elevation. Centered on this elevation is a shallow projecting wing accommodating the interior main stairway. Two banks of three, small sash windows are located on the wing at roughly mid-floor levels. A single entrance flanked by two windows is located at the basement level. The southern elevation is the mirror-image of the northern elevation, but lacking the fire escape.

The courthouse ground floor foyer is dominated by a marble staircase leading to a landing at mid-floor level. The staircase then splits and doubles-back on either side of the first flight of stairs. The balusters are wrought iron and exhibit a diamond pattern in a circle design, perhaps a conventionalization of a flower. The floors are terrazzo. A cornice wrapping the ground floor public spaces features a subdued fluted panel design. Narrow staircases drop down to the basement on either side of the main staircase, meeting at a mid-floor landing and returning under the main staircase to the basement.

The second floor foyer features a band of plaster frieze ornamentation wrapping around the entire space, with egg-and-dart moulding alternating with garland swags and dentils. Doorways throughout the building are cased in oak, and some are topped with broken pediment details. Ceiling pendant light fixtures and cast-iron radiators found in the foyer and elsewhere throughout the building appear to be original to the period of construction. Tall marble baseboards are employed in the public spaces.

The architectural style of the Inyo County Courthouse is Neo-Classical Revival, with a strong leaning towards the Grecian mode of this style, which is typified by the use of a full-height colonnaded portico, Greek-order columns, classical detailing and symmetrical elevations. The Neo-Classical Revival style was intended to communicate a sense of timelessness, monumentality, soberness, dignity and restraint. The style could also be quite readily represented by applying minimal architectural surface treatments to large, rectangular volumes. These characteristics lent to its frequent use in the design of late Nineteenth and early Twentieth century public buildings. The design of the Inyo County Courthouse serves as a typical example of the use of this style in a public building.

### **Landscape Plan**

The landscape plan for the Inyo County Courthouse was designed in 1922 by Inyo County Horticultural Commissioner John Wardle Dixon, County Supervisor George Naylor and a landscape architect from Stanford with the last name of McLain (first name unknown). This original landscape plan served to frame the prominent western elevation of the building with two specimen Blue Spruce located well to either side of the central walkway, and to establish a backdrop for the building with the planting to the east of the courthouse of Sequoia, Cedar of Lebanon, Deodar Cedar, Incense Cedar and Italian Cypress. These trees are the most striking of the remaining large specimens. A row of eight Cork Elms defines the northern edge of the site, along Center Street. A semi-circular driveway, located at the rear of the courthouse, is still in existence and was part of the original plan. The majority of the original trees, planted in 1922, remain, though a number of trees and shrubs located on the southern edge of the site were removed with the construction of the county annex building. Located adjacent to the front sidewalk is a memorial plaque honoring the Inyo County veterans who gave their lives in World War I. It was placed on the large boulder during the courthouse dedication in 1922.

### **Integrity**

Overall, the integrity of the building's design, materials and workmanship appear to be excellent. The courthouse building is essentially unaltered both on the exterior and on the key interior public spaces. The only known and apparent exterior modifications are the fire escape added to the northern elevation, and presumably the simultaneous replacement of a window at the fire escape landing with a door, and the addition of texture coating over the original cement mortar plastering. These alterations occurred in 1984 and 1982, respectively. They are not highly visible nor are they especially intrusive. The original plaster finish over the cement mortar was probably smooth. It is difficult to tell because there are no close-up photos. The texture coating is slightly rough, but not enough to make a big difference between the original appearance and the present appearance. Several first floor window transoms have been covered with wood across the inside. Air conditioning units have been installed in some of the windows, but the windows still

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**Inyo County Courthouse, Inyo County, CA — Narrative Description [continued]**

remain. Also, some transom windows have been covered over with paint or some other material, because the ceilings were lowered inside. The windows, however, are still intact. Some ceilings appear to have been lowered within the office areas, but this has not occurred within any of the public hallways or foyer areas. A few, relatively minor site plan alterations were made when the sidewalks on the southern end of the building were redesigned in connection with the construction of the county annex building.

The building's integrity of feeling and association also remain excellent. The building's continuous and current occupancy by the county courts, library, and other historic public services establishes a strong, direct visual and functional connection with the period of significance.

The building's setting is defined by the landscape plan created for the building, and the immediately adjacent buildings within the courthouse grounds. The landscape plan has been compromised somewhat by the removal of trees located mainly to the south, on and near the site of the 1964-65 county annex building. However, the original landscape plan remains largely intact within the immediate vicinity of the courthouse, and in this respect continues to provide a clear sense of the original design intent. The construction of the county annex building roughly 65 feet to the south of the historic courthouse serves to detract somewhat from the building's integrity of setting. While this newer building did not make any effort to architecturally complement the earlier building, it is not physically connected and was sited such that it does not substantially interfere with public views of the historic courthouse.

**William H. Weeks, architect**

The architect responsible for the design of the courthouse was William H. Weeks (1866-1936), a notable designer of public buildings, mainly in northern California. Weeks was born on Prince Edward Island, Canada, the son of builder/designer Richard Weeks. His family relocated to Denver in 1880, where William Weeks was enrolled at the Brinker Institute, a private day and boarding school, where he studied architectural design. By 1885 the family had moved to Wichita, Kansas, where he worked with his father in the construction trade, and where Weeks also began his career as a building designer. A series of subsequent relocations brought him eventually to Watsonville in Monterey County, California in 1894 and then to San Francisco in 1904. At various times during his lengthy career, he operated branch offices in Salinas, Oakland and San Jose.

The William Weeks practice was exceptionally prolific, and he accumulated an especially large number of credits for the design of public buildings, particularly schools. His firm was also responsible for a substantial number of commercial buildings and residences in San Francisco, and around the San Francisco Bay counties, and Monterey County. His impact was especially notable in Gilroy, Hollister, Monterey, Oakland, Pacific Grove, Salinas, San Jose, Santa Cruz and Woodland, with his firm having designed at least ten buildings in each city.

Weeks was an advocate for concrete construction and "fireproof" design. This, together with his lengthy resume in the design of public buildings probably led to the decision by the Inyo County Board of Supervisors to hire him to design their new courthouse in 1917. During the same time period and in Inyo County, Weeks also designed Bishop High School (1921) and Lone Pine High School (circa 1920).

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Inyo County Courthouse, Inyo County, CA — Narrative Statement of Significance [continued]

**Summary**

The Independence Courthouse is eligible under Criterion A under the category of government for its function (role) in housing the county seat from 1921 to 1947. The courthouse is also important for its association with the economic and political development of the Owens Valley. This elaborately designed building represents the peak of local autonomy in the Owens Valley, before the City of Los Angeles purchased the majority of land in the valley, including most of the land within the county seat. Water development policies adopted by the City of Los Angeles after 1924 led ultimately to the destruction of irrigated agriculture, and the virtual depopulation of the Owens Valley. The courthouse is also eligible under Criterion C (architecture) as the only example of monumental, Neo-Classical Revival public architecture in the Owens Valley.

**Period of Significance**

The period of significance (1921 - 1947) is based on the date of completion of the Inyo County Courthouse and the beginning of its function as the county seat of government. Although the courthouse continues to serve as the seat of Inyo County government, no historical events of exceptional significance after 1947 (within the last fifty years) have occurred.

**Economic & Political Context**

*Development of the Owens Valley: 1858 to 1900*

Prior to the formation of Inyo County and the establishment of Independence as the County seat in 1866, a considerable degree of human activity occurred in the Owens Valley. The Paiute Indians, the first inhabitants, made use of the waters from the mountain streams, building dams along Bishop Creek to catch fish and collected seeds, grasses and nuts.

The first white men to settle in the valley came in search of the rich mineral deposits. A number of mines opened beginning in 1858, with the discovery of silver in the Panamint Mountains, followed by ore discoveries in the Coso Mountains in 1860. The Russ Mining District also opened in 1860 southeast of Independence. Many small mines opened but all had difficulty in operating during the 1860s because of the constant threat of Indian attacks.

By the early 1860s, following a glowing account of the Owens Valley written by Captain J.W. Davidson, the valley began to receive a steady flow of cattlemen, miners and settlers. Davidson wrote, "The mountains are filled with timber, the vallies [sic] with water and meadows of luxuriant grass. Some of these meadows contain, at a moderate estimate, ten thousand acres, every foot of which can be irrigated. ... Wherever water touches it (the soil), it produces abundantly. I should think it well suited to the growth of wheat, barley, oats, rye and various fruits, the apple, pear, etc.... To the Grazier, this is one of the finest parts of the State; to the Farmer, it offers every advantage but a market." (Kahrl, 1982: 33)

Cattlemen entered the valley in search of pastures following the drought of the early 1860s. Samuel Bishop was one of the early cattlemen to settle in the valley in 1861, and the town of Bishop was named for him.

War broke out between the Paiutes and the white settlers in 1861 and lasted until 1866, when the Indians were finally subdued by the Second Cavalry of the California Volunteers. More than two hundred Indians were killed, with thirty whites losing their lives. Camp Independence was established on July 4, 1862 to protect settlers in the valley from the hostile Indians who steadfastly maintained that they were the rightful owners of the land. The camp was closed in 1877.

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## Inyo County Courthouse, Inyo County, CA — Narrative Statement of Significance [continued]

After the fighting had ceased, many of the Paiutes remained in the Owens Valley, finding work on the ranches that were being established. A large number of settlers began entering the valley once the wars ended, encouraged by the ample water supplies and the access to free 160 acre parcels of public land made available through the Homestead Act of 1862.

By the late 1890s the Inyo Valley was covered with farms and showing great promise as an agricultural district. On 141,059 acres of land, there were 424 farms of approximately 175 acres or less owned primarily by family farmers. Of this acreage, 41,026 was irrigated and planted in grains such as hay, alfalfa, wheat, oats and barley. Only seven of fifty-eight California counties ranked higher than Inyo in alfalfa acreage, and Inyo ranked ninth among counties in acres of corn (Kahrl, 1988: 36-37).

Agriculture in the valley would probably have developed faster had adequate transportation been available for shipping farm products. The small narrow-gauge Carson and Colorado Railroad was completed in 1883 for use in the mines, and was not much value to local growers. However, by 1910, with the beginning of construction of the Owens Valley aqueduct, the railroad was connected to the south through the Owens Valley to Los Angeles by the Southern Pacific Railroad, who had acquired the Carson and Colorado Railroad (Chalfant, 1933: 313).

By the close of the century, the early towns of San Carlos, Owensville, Graham City, Bend City and Kearsarge, had disappeared. However, several other towns remained or were established such as Bishop, Independence, Laws and Lone Pine. Bishop incorporated in 1903 and became one of the principal valley towns because of the concentration of ranches along Bishop Creek. Ranchers established a complex series of canals and ditches that brought water from the Eastern Sierra watershed to their farms.

In the early years of the twentieth century, settlers in the Owens Valley began additional development in the areas of mining, commercial activity and power companies. Of particular interest to the farmers was the Federal Reclamation Service Project being studied for the Owens Valley. The valley was a natural candidate for such a project because its rich bottom lands, naturally arid climate and the seemingly unlimited supply of irrigation water flowing into the valley down the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada. The report was favorable for constructing an irrigation project for the Owens Valley.

### *The struggle for water: the building of the Los Angeles Aqueduct; 1900 - 1930*

At the same time Inyo County was beginning its development in the early 1900s, the City of Los Angeles was searching for a new source of water to sustain its rapid growth. The interest in a federal reclamation project for the Owens Valley did not go unnoticed by Los Angeles officials. Connections between Los Angeles water consultants and the federal reclamation project resulted in the acquisition of Owens Valley water rights by the City of Los Angeles beginning in 1905. The construction of an immense, gravity flow aqueduct connecting the Owens Valley and the City of Los Angeles was planned by City Engineer William Mulholland.

The Bureau of Reclamation eventually gave up their interest in an irrigation project for the Owens Valley, upon the recommendation of their engineers. Despite extensive opposition from Owens Valley residents, the decision to divert Owens Valley water south to Los Angeles was ultimately made by President Theodore Roosevelt, who believed the greater public interest would be served by providing water for the greatest number of people, which was clearly the City of Los Angeles. In 1907 Los Angeles residents approved a bond measure for the construction of the aqueduct. The project was completed in 1913.

The new aqueduct's intake began just slightly north of Independence and therefore, did not greatly impact the ranchers and farmers in the populated Bishop area north of Independence. In fact in 1916 City Engineer William Mulholland boasted about the valleys growth since the City of Los Angeles began buying land in the valley. He stated, "the valley has developed at an accelerated rate both in population and wealth from the time of the advent of the City" (Kahrl, 1988: 222). The actual statistics reported a mixed picture. Whereas crop values tripled and farms grew from 438 to 521 between 1909 and 1919, population only increased less than one percent during this same period (Kahrl, 1988: 226).

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**Inyo County Courthouse, Inyo County, CA — Narrative Statement of Significance [continued]**

In 1917 the California Development Board claimed the Owens Valley was a region “just awakening to its limitless possibilities, both agriculturally and industrially.” (Kahrl 1982: 223) Hay accounted for two-thirds of the value of all crops grown in Inyo County in 1920, followed by wheat and fruit trees that were just coming into production. The cattle and poultry industry produced well, and the mineral production in the form of soda ash and bicarbonate increased 137 percent between 1910 and 1920. A new state fish hatchery was constructed in Independence in 1920.

It appeared at the time that adequate supplies of water remained to fulfill the needs of both the Owens Valley and the City of Los Angeles. This remained essentially the case until the prolonged drought of the 1920s, coupled with the ever-increasing demands of urban and rural Los Angeles, generated the prospect of severe water shortages in Southern California. The growing sense of urgency among the water agencies induced Mulholland to seek new supplies of water for the city, both by extracting more water from the Owens Valley, and by proposing a second aqueduct connecting the city to the Colorado River. The City of Los Angeles had already begun drafting subsurface water from the Owens Valley in 1918, increasing the number of wells to 32 by 1920. Though these were operated at first only seasonally, they established a precedent for extracting ground water which, once expanded, was to ultimately spell the end of the era of irrigated agriculture in the Owens Valley.

Two reports prepared for the city by consulting geologist Thomas Means in 1923 and 1924 suggested, for the first time, that the Owens Valley be depopulated for the purpose of diverting all of its water resources, including both surface flows and ground water, to Los Angeles. The conclusions of the Means reports were to be echoed by William Mulholland in his own report later in 1924. The decision to tap additional underground sources of water in the Owens Valley infuriated the farmers and ranchers, who filed injunctions against the city as the water tables fell. The City of Los Angeles responded by beginning a process of buying out the farmers. During the 1920s the City of Los Angeles succeeded in acquiring most of the land in and around the cities of Bishop and Independence.

This new and far more aggressive stance taken by the City of Los Angeles touched off a revolt on the part of valley residents. Tensions heightened to the extent that in 1924 valley farmers dynamited the aqueduct near Lone Pine. Others who chose to remain on their farms retaliated by diverting water from canals owned by the city into their own ditches. The revolt of 1924 culminated in the occupation of the Alabama Gates control station by valley residents in November. The ranchers succeeded in diverting the waters of the aqueduct into the Owens River for several days during this internationally publicized event, which had the effect of generating substantial sympathy for the plight of the residents, even from the Los Angeles press. The occupation of the Alabama Gates ended with assurances of a negotiated financial settlement between the city and the distressed valley property owners. These negotiations soon collapsed, however, leaving behind only a heightened sense of anger and mutual distrust.

Vigilante actions against the city and the aqueduct continued unabated into 1927. A series of “night rider” incidents during May and June induced the city to respond with force, sending hundreds of heavily armed police reserves and private detectives to the valley with “shoot to kill” orders. A series of arrests, and the convictions of the prominent Watterson brothers in November, 1927 left the valley residents dispirited and resigned to their fates. Without access to water, many of the remaining farmers sold out to the city, and the final transition from crops to cattle ranching began.

### **Government Context**

#### *Establishment of Independence as the County Seat*

The town of Independence took its name from nearby Camp Independence. The townsite was laid out by Thomas Edwards on February 13, 1866 and officially recorded on May 12, 1867. Edwards and his family came to the Owens Valley in 1863 to raise cattle. Acquiring Putnam’s Trading Post and adjacent lands, Edwards began furnishing beef and supplies to Camp Independence. He gradually began selling off lots in the town. Two lots on Jackson Street were reserved for the Courthouse. When the Board of Supervisors were ready to build a new courthouse, they asked Edwards if they could switch the two lots on Block 22, previously planned for the courthouse, for two lots on block 26. This site was on the town’s main thoroughfare, Edwards Avenue, (US Highway

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**Inyo County Courthouse, Inyo County, CA — Narrative Statement of Significance [continued]**

The first courthouse was built by J.J. Mankin in 1869, but was destroyed only a few years later during the earthquake of 1872. It had been a two-story building constructed of brick and had a wooden porch across the front supported by massive columns, reminiscent of the Greek Revival style.

In 1873 a second two-story courthouse was completed using the plans of G. Stecker, with ample wood detailing including a balcony and a tower. This building burned in the disastrous fire of 1886 that claimed thirty-eight buildings in Independence. The lack of fire wagons in the town at this time hindered the fire fighters who relied on a bucket brigade with little success.

A third courthouse was constructed in 1887 by M.E. Gilmore using the plans of W.N. Cancannah, at a cost of \$10,000. This courthouse remained in use in 1917 when discussions began among the Board of Supervisors to construct a fireproof courthouse that would protect county records. A committee was formed and visits were made to a number of courthouses and other public buildings throughout Northern California and Nevada, including San Francisco, Reno, Sacramento and Woodland among others.

*Selection of an Architect and Contractor for the New Courthouse*

While the committee was touring other courthouses, they noticed that a large number of public buildings were designed by the architect William H. Weeks. Because of his vast experience, the committee selected Weeks because "we believe him thoroughly versed in all matters pertaining to the construction of public buildings" (Board of Supervisors minutes, Vol. G, page 350, 7/11/17).

The Board of Supervisors' committee, comprised of local farmers, planned to build an "economical" cement building and raise funds for the required \$100,000 building costs through a bond measure, although ultimately this method of financing was not used. It was not until almost two years later that the Board once again took up the matter of constructing a new courthouse. On July 9, 1919, a number of county representatives spoke at the Board of Supervisors meeting, advocating for proceeding with the courthouse construction. The Board agreed, and on July 11, 1919 a resolution was drawn up to hire W. H. Weeks as the architect. This resolution was adopted on December 9, 1919. The County abandoned Center Street between Edwards (US Highway 395) and Jackson streets and acquired adjacent lots for the courthouse site in 1919.

Monies to finance the courthouse construction were finally received from long overdue funds from the state with regard to income from taxation of railroads and other utilities. These funds totaled \$100,382.00 and provided the impetus for the County to hire the architect to design the new courthouse, the fourth and last for Inyo County. Additional funds to complete the construction, furnish the building and landscape the site came from interest earned on money from the county's general fund. The old courthouse was removed shortly after the new courthouse was occupied in 1921.

*Courthouse Construction*

The contract for the construction was awarded to William McCombs and Paul Daniel McCombs of Bishop on April 10, 1920. Construction began shortly thereafter and was accepted as completed by the Board of Supervisors on November 8, 1921. The building was dedicated on April 10, 1922.

A special ceremony marked the dedication with music provided by the Fort Independence Indian Band and the High School Glee Club, followed by a pageant of Inyo County produced by the Federated Women's Clubs. Governor William D. Stephens gave the main address followed by Senator Lyman M. King. A memorial plaque was unveiled to honor the Inyo County servicemen who lost their lives in World War I. A reception followed the afternoon ceremony held in the new courthouse where all were invited to tour the building. In the evening, a dance was held on the courthouse lawn followed by supper in the library, which was located in the basement.

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**Inyo County Courthouse, Inyo County, CA — Narrative Statement of Significance [continued]**

Over the years, the Courthouse and its grounds have served as a public meeting space for local celebrations and special events. Art shows have been held on the lawn for many years, as well as the Fourth of July celebrations with concerts and a parade. The lawn is used for easter egg hunts and Santa Claus lands on the roof of the Courthouse at Christmas season.

*Role of County Government*

In its capacity as the county seat, the new Inyo County Courthouse housed a number of important offices and functions under one roof. These included the courts, county library, offices of the Treasurer, Tax Collector, County Clerk, Auditor, Assessor, Surveyor and District Attorney. Presiding over the offices and functions is the Inyo County Board of Supervisors. In later years, other offices and departments were added, such as planning and building and safety. By the mid-1960s, the County Annex was built to house some of these expanded offices and new departments.

The Assessor's, Surveyor's and Recorder's offices at the courthouse were particularly busy during the late 1920s and 1930s, as the City of Los Angeles continued to purchase land throughout Inyo County, and the valley became depopulated because of a lack of water to serve local needs. The courthouse has continued throughout its history to house important functions of county government that effect the lives of the community in countless ways from legal decisions to those of growth and development to the simple recording of births, deaths and marriages. It contains valuable archives that relate to its governmental functions. The Inyo Courthouse and its grounds have come to be thought of in the public's eye as a gathering place for residents and one that also doubles for festivals and special social events.

The functions of Inyo County government are varied and relate primarily to carrying out the laws and various regulations relating to the daily life of its citizens. These functions are similar throughout the various counties in California. However, the actual court trials for the most part reflect the activities of county residents or those doing business in the county of Inyo. The courthouse in Independence was the location of several trials and judicial rulings relating to the water wars with the City of Los Angeles during the 1920s. Included in these were three legal actions which were turning points in the water wars.

The occupation of the Alabama Gates by residents of the Owens Valley in November 1924 marked the peak of local resistance to the City of Los Angeles' influence on local politics and economics. This incident additionally called into serious question the ability of the Inyo County governmental agencies and legal authorities to cope with steadily increasing tensions between residents and the city, and the alarming trend towards lawlessness and vigilante-style justice. Accordingly, critical portions of this significant event were played out by local officials at the seat of Inyo County government, the Inyo County Courthouse.

Local enmity towards the City of Los Angeles had risen to such an extent by the time of the Alabama Gates incident that the sitting Superior Court Judge William Dehy pleaded with Governor Friend W. Richardson to be excused from hearing any further legal actions connected with water wars. Dehy had previously issued numerous related decisions from the bench, and most recently to this request, a widely-ignored temporary restraining order against the valley residents carrying out the Alabama Gates occupation.

Dehy and Inyo County District Attorney Jess Hessian and Sheriff Charles A. Collins expressed similar sentiments with respect to the ability of local authorities to keep the peace. Of the situation then developing in the Owens Valley, Collins said, "... a state of anarchy exists in Inyo County. The court injunction has been openly defied. I could disperse these men, who are my neighbors and friends, but if I did this I would be spreading a cancer over the county." (Los Angeles Examiner, 11/19/24: II-4).

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**Inyo County Courthouse, Inyo County, CA — Narrative Statement of Significance [continued]**

In response to the City of Los Angeles's insistence that Collins immediately arrest the leaders of the insurrection, Sheriff Collins instead requested that Governor Richardson send in state troops. The Governor tersely denied all local pleadings for outside law enforcement assistance and refused to allow Judge Dehy to disqualify himself. In his reply to the Inyo County Board of Supervisor's request for assistance, Governor Richardson placed the onus directly on the county, writing: "I would suggest that you call the attention of your various county officials, and particularly the Sheriff and District Attorney to ... the liability of the county itself for the maintenance of law and order." (Los Angeles Times, 11/6/24 ; Kahrl, 1988: 292).

As the water conflict became more acute, so did the related legal and political maneuverings taking place at the Inyo County Courthouse. In July 1927 the Inyo County Grand Jury convened to examine the spate of dynamite attacks on the aqueduct, and to investigate the city's charges that sufficient evidence already existed to prosecute the perpetrators. These investigations provided further grounds for the trading of accusations between the City of Los Angeles and Inyo County officials. The city, insisting that District Attorney Hession was proving unwilling to prosecute, appealed to the State Attorney General for his replacement with a special prosecutor. (Owens Valley Herald, 7/20/27)

By the late 1920s, Inyo County's jurisdictional authority had apparently become steadily eroded, and the line between local and City of Los Angeles interests blurred. While the County of Inyo technically retained full legal jurisdiction and local authority, in practice it appears that the city and county governmental interests had by that time become heavily enmeshed. In 1927 both the Chairman of the Inyo County Board of Supervisors, the County Assessor and other county staff members were also part-time employees of the Department of Water and Power. The City of Los Angeles, by then the majority landholders in the county and landlords to many residents, had in itself become a singularly compelling constituent. (Owens Valley Herald, 4/6/27)

The Inyo County Courthouse was the venue for the closing chapter in the water wars, the trial and conviction of the Watterson brothers in 1927 on bank fraud charges. Wilfred and Mark Watterson, owners of the only banking institution in the Owens Valley, were both widely considered to be pillars of the community and two of the fiercest opponents of the City of Los Angeles. The collapse of the Inyo County Bank and the sentencing of the Watterson brothers was a particularly painful, and ultimately critically demoralizing, event in the long conflict between valley residents and the city -- seen at the time as the last in a long series of betrayals. During the trial, the jury was reportedly permitted to "roam about the courthouse grounds out of earshot" while the defense and prosecuting attorneys argued motions. (Los Angeles Times, 11/8/27)

The Inyo County Superior Court's decision in *Hillside Water v. City of Los Angeles* (1938) and the subsequent "Chandler Decree" (1940) reduced the City of Los Angeles' rights to pump groundwater from the Bishop watershed. These decisions proved to be of continued importance in litigating groundwater claims for decades thereafter and are still relied upon today. (Kahrl, 1988: 401-2)

### **Architecture and Design**

The Inyo County Courthouse is architecturally significant as the only example of monumental Neo-Classical Revival public architecture in the Owens Valley, an area composed of both Inyo and Mono counties. The site planning also represents the only local example of the City Beautiful approach to the siting of public buildings.

Neo-Classical Revival architecture was the style of choice for public buildings during the late Nineteenth through the early Twentieth centuries, and the construction of grand public buildings of this nature are best understood as tangible statements of a community's maturity, optimism, and positive expectations for the future. It was precisely this local mood which was reflected by the construction of the Inyo County Courthouse at the peak of the area's economic prosperity and local autonomy.

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**Inyo County Courthouse, Inyo County, CA — Narrative Statement of Significance [continued]**

The Inyo County Courthouse is a good representative example of Neo-Classical Revival public architecture. It exhibits all of the distinctive characteristics of the style, including symmetrical elevations, classical order columns, portico, monumental stairways, and classically-derived detailing. In terms of local context, the building is architecturally unique, as no other buildings of this type were constructed in the Owens Valley. The City Beautiful approach to site planning is evident, with the apparently deliberate alteration of the street pattern serving to emphasize the principal western elevation of the building.

That this property represents the only local example of monumental public architecture in the Owens Valley is a direct product of the region's highly unusual political evolution, and the sharp reversal of the patterns of regional growth and development occurring after the mid-1920s. The Owens Valley was afforded only a brief glimpse of the sort of prosperity and community identity that would sustain the construction of grand public architecture.

Had Inyo County's political and economic evolution proceeded along more conventional lines, it is reasonable to predict that other public buildings of similar scale and visual importance would have been constructed in the county seat or elsewhere in the cities in the valley. The artificial constraints on growth which occurred almost immediately after the construction of the courthouse precluded this development, however, resulting in this single, unique property.

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Inyo County Courthouse, Inyo County, CA — Major Bibliographic References [continued]

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*Los Angeles Times*, 11/6/24.

*Los Angeles Times*, 10/8/27.

*The Inyo Register*, 4/13/22

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**Inyo County Courthouse, Inyo County, CA — Verbal Boundary Description [continued]**

The Inyo County Courthouse is located on the northern 235 feet of city block 22 bounded by Edwards Street (US Highway 395) on the west, Center Street on the north, Jackson Street on the east and the county annex building on the south. (Assessor's Parcel # 002-054-013)

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**Inyo County Courthouse, Inyo County, CA — Boundary Justification [continued]**

The nominated property boundary includes the building and grounds that have been historically associated with the Inyo County courthouse. The southern half of the block has been excluded from the nomination because the three buildings were constructed after 1950 and are not of exceptional architectural design and therefore do not warrant inclusion in the nomination.

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Inyo County Courthouse, Inyo County, CA — [continued]

Photographs

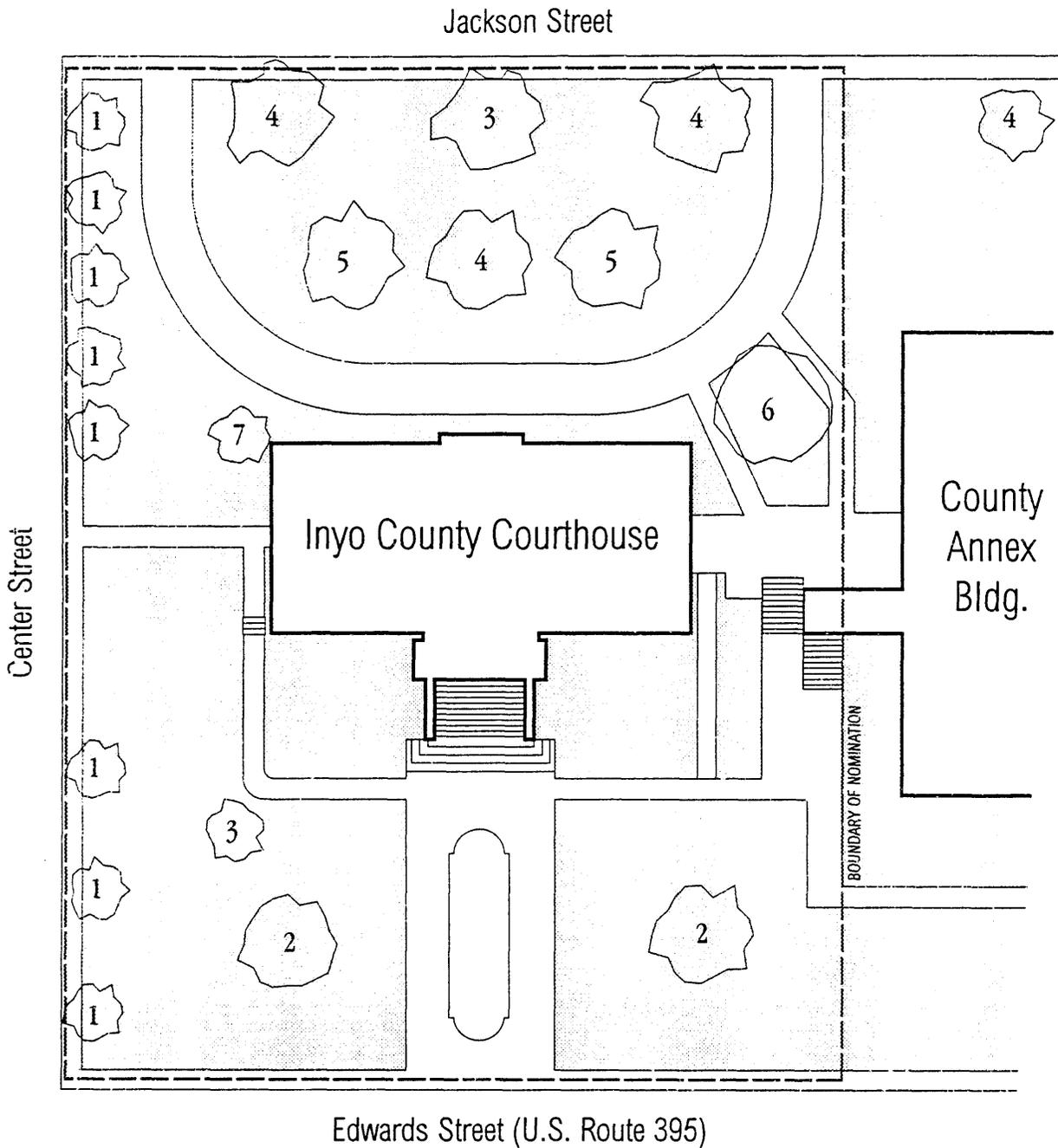
Inyo County Courthouse  
Independence  
Inyo County, CA

Photographer: Ron Harryman (photos #1 & 2)  
Photographer: Eric Poppleton (photo #3)  
Photographer: unknown (photo #4)  
Photographer: Mitch Stone (photos #5-7)

Date of photographs: 1986 (photos #1 & 2)  
Date of photograph: 1995 (photo #3)  
Date of photograph: 1921 (photo #4)  
Date of photographs: 1987 (photos #5-7)

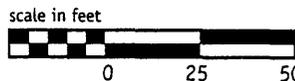
Location of negatives: Eastern California Museum, 155 N. Grant Street, Independence, CA 93526

- 1 Inyo County Courthouse, west elevation, looking east
- 2 Inyo County Courthouse, detail of portico on western elevation, looking east
- 3 Inyo County Courthouse, first floor staircase in main foyer, showing marble and terrazzo floors, wrought iron staircase, looking northeast
- 4 Inyo County Courthouse, 1921, just after completion with 1887 courthouse still standing on right, looking east
- 5 Inyo County Courthouse, 1987, south elevation, looking north
- 6 Inyo County Courthouse, 1987, north elevation, looking south
- 7 Inyo County Courthouse, 1987, east elevation, looking north



**Plant Species**

- 1. Cork Elm
- 2. Kaster (Colorado) Blue Spruce
- 3. Sequoia
- 4. Deodar Cedar
- 5. Cedar of Lebanon
- 6. Incense Cedar
- 7. Italian Cypress



# Inyo County Courthouse National Register Nomination

July 1997