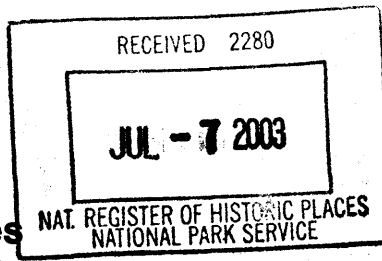


United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service



797

National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any 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 Nebraska State Historical Society Building

Other names/site number Nebraska State Historical Library and Museum Archives of the State of Nebraska; LC13:D09-004

2. Location

Street & number 1500 R Street Not for publication

City or town Lincoln Vicinity

State Nebraska Code NE County Lancaster Code 109 Zip code 68501

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, 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.)

Lawrence Sommer
Signature of certifying official

6/30/03
Date

Director, Nebraska State Historical Society
State or 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 certifying 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 eligible for the National Register.

see continuation sheet.

determined not eligible for the National Register.

removed from the National Register.

other, (explain): _____

Edson F. Beall 8/21/03

Signature of Keeper

Date of Action

Nebraska State Historical Society Building

Name of Property

Lancaster County, Nebraska

County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply)

- Private
- Public-local
- Public-state
- Public-federal

Category of Property

(Check only one box)

- Building(s)
- District
- Site
- Structure
- Object

Number of Resources within Property

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

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1		Buildings
		Sites
		Structures
		Objects
1		Total

Name of related multiple property listing

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

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

RECREATION AND CULTURE-Museum

EDUCATION-Research facility

GOVERNMENT-Government office

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

GOVERNMENT-Government office

EDUCATION-Research facility

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Modern Movement

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Foundation Stone-Limestone

Walls Stone-Limestone, marble, glass

Roof

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.)

- X 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.
X C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

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

Property is:

- A Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
B Removed from its original location.
C A birthplace or 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 within the past 50 years.

Narrative Statement of Significance

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

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Education

Social History

Conservation

Architecture

Period of Significance

1953

Significant Dates

1953

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above.)

Cultural Affiliation

Architect/Builder

Ellery Lothrop Davis, Architect

Olson Construction, Builder

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

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

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- Preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
Previously listed in the National Register
Previously determined eligible by the National Register
Designated a National Historic Landmark
Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #
Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #

Primary location for additional data:

- X State Historic Preservation Office
X Other State agency-NSHS Archives
Federal agency
Local Government
University
Other
Name of repository:

10. Geographical DataAcreage of property Less than one acre

UTM References (place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet).

	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
1.	14	694045	4520807	3.			
2.				4.			

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 Byname/title Stacy Stupka-Burda, Bill Callahan and Greg Miller-NESHPO Staff; Jennifer Brockmeier, NSHS volunteerorganization Nebraska State Historical Societydate 4/14/03street & number 1500 R Streettelephone 402/471-4787city or town Lincolnstate NEzip code 68501**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 the SHPO or FPO.)

name/title Nebraska State Historical Society, Lawrence Sommer, Directorstreet & number 1500 R Streettelephone 402/471-4745city or town Lincolnstate NEzip code 68501

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determined 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, (15 USC 470 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this 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 Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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Nebraska State Historical Society Building

Name of Property

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The Nebraska State Historical Society Building (NSHS Building) is located in central Lincoln, Nebraska, on the southern edge of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln downtown campus. The NSHS Building is positioned at the northern terminus of what was once (and continues to be in other parts of the City) Fifteenth Street, now part of Centennial Mall. Opposite the NSHS Building at the southern terminus of this pedestrian mall is the spectacular Nebraska State Capitol, a National Historic Landmark. From the front steps and southern office windows of the NSHS Building one encounters a majestic view of the over four-hundred foot tall State Capitol seven blocks due south. The two buildings form unique and virtually antithetical architectural bookends to Lincoln's linear institutional hub.¹ Indeed, it is this architectural contrast with the Nebraska State Capitol that forms some measure of the NSHS Building's significance.

The NSHS Building, designed by Ellery Lothrop Davis in a spare Modern Movement style, is a rectangular two-story structure with a windowless raised basement. Structurally steel and concrete, the NSHS Building has a flat roof and a poured concrete foundation. The entire exterior, front to back and ground to parapet, is enveloped in an Indiana limestone veneer. Accentuating the yin and yang with the State Capitol, the limestone was harvested from the same quarry as the stone used in the Capitol building. The blocks of limestone veneer are mortared with extremely thin, smooth mortar joints. The color, composition and configuration of the mortar joints, coupled with the homogeneous limestone blocks creates a monolithic, continuous surface quality to the Building. This smooth, nearly featureless surface is in direct contrast with the ornate, intentionally irregular surface of the State Capitol.

The primary (south) façade of the NSHS building sports a stepped, curved two-story bay that relieves the otherwise stark rectangularity of the building. The bay is raised slightly above the roof of the building, and continues through to the rear past the north wall, having the effect of creating a stunted cross in plan. At the top of the bay on the primary facade, the words "Nebraska State Historical Society" are formed in unadorned relief completely across the top course of limestone blocks. In direct sunlight, these words nearly fade into the stonework. Viewed in oblique sunlight, they appear to leap at the viewer. A band of steel casement windows is centrally located directly below these words. Steel casement windows also flank the central bay on at the second floor level, six on the east side, five on the west. The horizontal orientation of the windows, viewed in relation to the vertical nature of the Capitol, once again accents the contrasting architectural relationship of the two buildings.

The main entrance to the building is centrally located in the curved bay. Flanking the entrance are two broad, low-rise limestone stairs attended by brushed-steel handrails. A concrete platform projects outward from the doorway the width of the stairs. Entry into the building is gained through a recessed double glass door.

The entry is flanked by door-height dark green marble panels. On the left (west) panel is inscribed "The Spirit of a People Lives in its History," and on the right (east) panel "Here Open to All is the History of This People." Directly above the entry, deeply inscribed in the limestone, are the words "Nebraska State Historical Library and Museum" and "Archives of the State of Nebraska." A sense of visual depth to the entryway is created by the combination of its location at the horizontal apex of the curved bay, the glass doors, the dark, recessed marble panels and the deeply inscribed words above. This visual depth in turn creates an image of entering an important space. The entry design is, once again, in direct contrast with the State Capitol's north entry, which faces the NSHS building. The Capitol's north entry, the main, grand entry for that building, is dominated by an immense limestone stairway flanked by enormous carved limestone walls. The effect is of the Capitol building reaching out to the viewer, whereas the NSHS Building's entry draws a viewer's eyes toward the inner sanctum of the building.

¹ A partial list of institutions along Centennial Mall include the Nebraska State Office Building, the former Security Mutual Life Insurance building (now UN-L's College of Journalism and Mass Communications Andersen Building) the State Historical Society Museum, the Lincoln Children's Museum, Alltel corporate offices, and the Denney Federal Office Building.

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The west façade of the NSHS Building is completely unadorned. The east façade is punctured by four steel casement windows at the second floor. The north (rear) façade of the NSHS Building is dominated by a large rectangular bay, which is in turn dominated by thirteen columns of glass-block on its north side, each four blocks wide. This bay is a continuation of the stepped circular bay that dominates the primary façade of the Building, and is where the archives of the State of Nebraska are collected. A loading dock and entry are located on the west side of the bay. Six steel casement office windows flank the bay on the east side of the building's second floor. Handicapped access is located on the first floor flanking the bay on the east.

When entering the Building, a visitor steps first into a terrazzo-floored, low-ceiling rotunda. The rotunda occupies the first floor space created by the curved bay, and is a key public space in the Building. This space was designed and is still used as a display space with the exhibit cases lining the circular walls. Upon exiting the rotunda, one enters a broad hallway space in its original condition. This hallway, another key public space, is dominated by card-catalogue drawers on the north side, and exhibit space on the south. Two offices occupy the space behind the card catalogue drawers.

Turning right (east) down the hallway, a visitor enters the main reading/research space for Historical Library/Archives patrons. Entered through large double doors and dominated by a service desk, broad library tables and microfilm readers, the reading room is essentially a large open space. To the left (north) of the double doors is a single door opening into a utility space. Right (south) of the double doors is an open stairway that leads to both the basement and second floor level. To the right (west) of the stairway is a door opening into the space behind the rotunda exhibit space.

At the opposite end of the public hallway (west), a visitor will see another set of large double doors, usually closed. The area behind these doors, another large, essentially open space, is reserved for curatorial and archive staff offices and work space. To the right of the double doors (north) is the access to the elevator and loading dock. To the left (south) of the double doors is another set of stairs leading to the basement and second story levels. To the left (east) of the stairway is a door opening into the space behind the rotunda exhibit space.

The primary public spaces of the first floor are largely intact. Elements remaining from the building's museum use include display cases in the rotunda and picture rail exhibit mechanisms. Character defining features also include the configurations and spatial relationship of and between the rotunda and the broad main hall; blond wood finishes including stair rails and door trim, floor finishes and the open stairwells.

The floor plan of the second floor of the NSHS Building is virtually identical, in most ways, to the first floor. The broad, main hallway is intact, and office spaces dominate either end of the hallway. Offices on the south and east and northeast sides of the building are graced with the steel casement windows. Restrooms are located behind doors located at the top of both staircases.

The most significant space on the second floor is the room directly above the rotunda. Constructed as a library space, this room has a spectacular view southward of the State Capitol. Indeed this space is, at this writing, utilized as the Capitol View conference room. Five large windows look out upon Centennial Mall and the Capitol grounds seven blocks away. The spatial relationship between the NSHS Building and the Capitol is nowhere more obvious. The Capitol View room is shaped like a half-circle, with the curved side containing the windows. The room is dominated (after the view) by built-in bookshelves constructed of the same blond wood found throughout the building and wood veneer wall coverings. Entry to the room is gained from the main hallway through a set of double doors.

The basement space of the NSHS Building is more utilitarian than the other two floors. The basement level does continue the linear configuration of a large hallway terminated on the west side by office and workspaces. On the east side, the

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office and work spaces are found at the end of the hallway, but are located on the south side of the hallway. The lower level also contains the Building's mechanical systems and staff lounge.

Behind (north of) the publicly accessible spaces of the NSHS Building are the State archives. One of the most remarkable architectural features of the Building, the archives space is virtually unknown to the public, as access is available strictly to archives staff. The archives take up the space created by the large, rectangular bay found on the north side of the Building. This bay was constructed as a six-story space within the same vertical envelope as the southern, two-story and basement public side of the building. The six levels contain row upon row of metal stacks where various collections of archived materials are stored. The entire rear bay and its six levels are, essentially, a separate building. Each of the six levels are supported by steel frame and concrete floors that are structurally separate from the rest of the building. The archives are also separated from the main building by a mechanical system that maintains specific humidity and temperature levels. The archives are accessed through the rear elevator and through a single entry on each main floor. Though not up to current standards and woefully short on space, this part of the NSHS Building does reflect a state-of-the-art archive system from 1953. Although the main archive collection of the Nebraska State Historical Society continues to be located here, there are additional locations where archived material is stored.

Of note, the current landscaping associated with the NSHS Building, including the dual flagpoles, is a recent construction. This landscaping, accomplished by a collaborative effort between the Nebraska State Historical Society and the Nebraska Arboretum, is an implementation of the original landscape design for the building. The original design was never executed, and the current design accurately reflects the original NSHS Building landscape plans.

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The Nebraska State Historical Society Building (NSHS Building) is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under National Register Criteria A and C. The NSHS Building has statewide significance under Criterion A for its contribution to the social and cultural history of Nebraska through the acquisition, conservation and interpretation of Nebraska's cultural heritage; and through the administration of public policy related to these activities. The NSHS building is also significant under Criterion C through its embodiment of a type and period of design. This design reflects a sound interpretation of Modern Movement architecture; but in addition the NSHS Building's design reflects an outstanding effort by the principal architect, Ellery Lothrop Davis, to both complement and contrast Nebraska's NHL State Capitol. The Building has a high degree of physical integrity from the date of its construction and the significant, character-defining historic and architectural features are intact. The period of significance for the NSHS Building is 1953, the year construction was completed.

Criterion A

The Nebraska State Historical Society (NSHS) was founded in 1878 following two earlier attempts to organize a historical association in Nebraska. The first, the Nebraska Historical Society was established in Omaha 1858, four years after the territory of Nebraska was created.² Short-lived, this society was disbanded by the time a second attempt to organize a historical society was begun in 1867. At that time, three state-appointed commissioners planning the new capital city of Lincoln reserved Block 29 on the original city plat for the "State Historical and Library Association". Articles of incorporation were filed on the same day that the city plat was filed. The association planned to operate a public library "composed of good and useful books of ancient and modern history and other miscellaneous literature."³

The State Historical and Library Association was not active, and by 1875 Block 29 was included in a list of unappropriated lots. The sale of these unappropriated lots had been authorized by a state law of the same year. It was also in 1875 that the governor signed a law stipulating that Block 29 should be used for market square purposes only.⁴ So began a controversy known as the "historical block question" that would continue intermittently for three decades. This controversy, as Diffendal notes "was to have a significant effect on the Nebraska State Historical Society, which had not yet been founded when the controversy began."⁵

Upon its establishment in 1878, NSHS focused on obtaining funding from the Nebraska Legislature, and gaining public recognition and public support. The general purpose of the society was "to encourage historical research and inquiry, spread historical information, especially within the State of Nebraska, and to embrace alike aboriginal and modern history".

In 1883, following a request for funding, the NSHS was recognized by the Nebraska Legislature as a state institution. This funding request and recognition resulted in an annual appropriation for NSHS of \$500.

The first three NSHS secretaries, whose main responsibility was the operation of the society, were professors at the University of Nebraska. Due to these connections, early meetings and collections were held in University buildings. Portions of the University Library constructed in 1893 were constructed for NSHS, and included library stacks. The society

² Unless noted, general history of the State Historical Society Building taken from Anne Polk Diffendal's "A Centennial History of the Nebraska State Historical Society, 1878-1978" *Nebraska History*, Vol 59, No 3, Fall 1978.

³ Articles of Incorporation of the State Historical and Library Association, September 26, 1867. Found in the case file of the *State Historical and Library Association vs the City of Lincoln* filed in the Nebraska Supreme Court on February 24, 1882, and decided in the January term of 1883.

⁴ Lincoln's original market square block had been donated to the federal government for a post office building.

⁵ Diffendal p. 315.

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was certainly enjoying its most spacious home to date when construction of this building was completed in 1895. Offices, a reading room, and a room designed for receiving collections assured that the society's growing collections could be maintained.

Legislative appropriations to NSHS continued to grow, and by 1901 had grown to \$5000. This increase in funding allowed the society to expand their programs. These programs can be categorized as "field work" and "extension work". Field work consisted of actively seeking new historical materials for their collection, and incorporated archeological research, photography and sound recording. Extension work was described as offering educational services to all segments of the public. The expansion of these programs increased the collections of the society, and according to current museum practices, displays included as much of each collection as possible, with very little interpretation. Collections increased and space became problematic almost immediately.

In 1903, a bill introduced to provide additional funding for a building failed, as did attempts to provide funding through private donations. In 1907, after learning the history of Block 29, also known as the historical block, a bill was introduced to the legislature which gave the society \$100,000 for a facility that would be built on land donated by the City of Lincoln. When finally approved, the bill appropriated only \$25,000, as \$100,000 was perceived as too large a sum to be granted at one time. This appropriation was designated for the basement of one wing of a library and museum building. Additional appropriations to complete construction of this building were implied. Also important was that the legislature acknowledged that the Society was continuing the work for which Block 29 had originally been designated. The legislature stipulated that the money for construction of the new facility was contingent on the conveyance to the Society of Block 29, or a site of equal value, by the City of Lincoln. Following negotiations with the City of Lincoln, a site near 16th and H Streets was agreed upon. Plans for a four-story, Renaissance Revival style building designed by George A. Berlinghof were finalized. However, the Society had only received enough funding to construct the basement of one wing. Construction of this wing was completed by 1909, and in the spring of 1910, the first collections moved to the new location.

During the ensuing years, the Society was unable to secure the additional funding needed to complete the building at 16th and H Streets. In fact, throughout this time period, the Society struggled against proposed budget cuts to their regular budget. In 1915, the University of Nebraska asked the Society to vacate their rooms on campus. Efforts to secure private funding to construct a temporary building on Society property failed. A joint committee of the Society and the University recommended that a building for the Society be constructed near the University.

Through the next few years, the resources of the Society were stored at their basement facility and in buildings across the campus of the University. These locations were not only inadequate, but they also proved inconvenient. However, as construction had begun on the new state capitol building, it was clear that no legislative appropriations for a NSHS building would be forthcoming. In 1928, the Society requested space in the yet to be completed capitol building. In 1931, offices were moved into the Capitol, first into the tower, then finally into the southwest wing in 1933. Even while moving into its new space it became clear that the Society would in fact, need additional space. The decision was made to leave the Society's library at the University, where it remained until 1942, when it was finally moved to the Capitol.

With collections and facilities scattered across Lincoln, a building campaign was started in 1944. The Nebraska State Historical Society Foundation was incorporated to accept funds. Legislation was introduced which provided a new tax levy to be used to construct and equip a new building for the NSHS.

By 1946, the Society was in negotiations with the University of Nebraska Board of Regents for a site on campus. Eventually, lots on R Street and 15th were agreed upon, and the Society's half block on 16th Street was exchanged for the

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new lots. Designed by the architectural firm of Davis and Wilson, under the direction of Ellery Lothrop Davis, construction began in August 1951.

For the first time in its history, upon the completion of the Nebraska State Historical Society Building, all operations of the Society were housed under one roof (however briefly). Designed specifically for the Society, great care was taken to incorporate all manner of new technology related to the care and storage of collections. In keeping with the latest theories of museum studies of the day, display cases were designed in which a collection of material was displayed and interpreted for the public. This interpretive approach was relatively new in the 1950's, and few museums had incorporated this technique into their programs. According to Diffendal, "Both the building and the exhibit program set the style for historical museums in the Plains states for a number of years."⁶

From its inception in 1878, the mission of the Nebraska State Historical Society has been one of collecting and preserving historical material related to the settlement and growth of the State of Nebraska. Activities related to this goal have been broad and in numerous instances, forward thinking. These activities ranged from collecting and archiving copies of each newspaper in the state to acquiring important collections such as the Solomon D. Butcher photographic collection; from the establishment of the first professional archeological program in the state to one of the strongest statewide historic building surveys in the nation. The NSHS also pioneered outreach and education programs using first radio then television as tools to reach the State's widely scattered population. The NSHS continues to utilize the latest technologies in its mission, as evidenced by the recent establishment of the state-of-the-art Gerald R. Ford Conservation Center in Omaha. Broad in scope, the mission of the Society has included field work and extension work as a means to preserve and interpret the history of Nebraska. These important aspects continue to the present day, with continued emphasis on public outreach and education.

Criterion C

In most instances, identifiable, popular architectural styles in Nebraska tend to lag five, ten even fifteen years behind the style's commonly accepted period of significance. In at least one instance, however, architectural design in Nebraska was right in keeping with national trends. In the ten to twenty years after World War II, architects working in Lincoln and Omaha designed institutional, commercial and residential buildings that would not be out of place in regions more commonly thought sophisticated in terms of architecture. Though far from avant-garde, architects in Nebraska were certainly holding their own in terms of imagination, function and aesthetics. Buildings designed and built in Nebraska that illustrate this phenomenon include the former Strategic Air Command Headquarters Building and SAC Memorial Chapel at Offutt Air Force Base (Leo Daly, 1957, '56), the Peru State College Student Center in Peru (Clark, Enerson, 1960), the Hayes County Courthouse in Hayes Center (1954, Davis and Wilson), the Cuming County Courthouse in West Point (1957) and the Walter and Ruby Behlen House in Columbus (Leo Daly, 1958). This trend is quite visible in Lincoln, with buildings such as the former Bankers Life Building (current Ameritas building, Unthank & Unthank, 1959), the Lincoln Women's Club, the former Security Mutual Life Insurance Building (Davis and Wilson, 1956) and, not least, the Nebraska State Historical Society Building. These buildings (with the NSHS Building one of the earliest) are among the most significant of the era in terms of their status in Nebraska architectural history.

The NSHS Building also embodies a specific, distinct and significant design concept which was commissioned by the NSHS Board of Trustees, and implemented by Ellery Lothrop Davis. This concept was intended to reflect the relevancy of the State Historical Society, its mission and collections, to modern day Nebraskans. The new design was also meant to make a strong statement about the physical and cultural environment within which the NSHS Building would be built.

⁶ Diffendal, p. 388.

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The Architect

The NSHS Building was designed by Ellery Lothrop Davis. Davis remains one of the preeminent architects to have ever worked in Lincoln, and, indeed, the region. His firm (now known as Davis Design) has long been acknowledged as one of the more innovative firms working on the Plains. An incomplete list of buildings designed by Davis and/or his firm include, decade by decade, some of the most prominent buildings in Lincoln: the 1916 Scottish Rite Temple (NR 1986), the 1923 Temple B'nai Jeshurun (NR 1982), the 1933 Art Deco Town Park Garage building, the 1942 Love Memorial Library on the UN-L campus and the 1956 Security Mutual Life Insurance Building (now UN-L's College of Journalism Andersen Building). Each of these structures may be counted among the most prominent and most admired buildings of their era in the city. The Scottish Rite Temple and the Security Mutual buildings are located, as is the NSHS Building, on Lincoln's prominent Centennial Mall, formerly 15th Street.

Born in Florida in 1887, Davis' family moved to Lincoln, Nebraska in 1893. Educated at the University of Nebraska, with an advanced degree from Columbia University, Davis worked as a draftsman for George Berlinghof before joining him in partnership.⁷ This partnership produced many noteworthy buildings in Lincoln, including the 1916 Security Mutual Life Building (NRHP 1979, and not to be confused with the 1956 building built by the same company), Lincoln High School, the aforementioned Scottish Rite Temple and numerous buildings on the University of Nebraska-Lincoln campus.

By 1919, Davis had partnered with his new draftsman, Walter F. Wilson to form the architectural firm Davis and Wilson. Davis and Wilson designed several public schools around Nebraska as well as in Lincoln, including the Kearney Jr. High School (NR '00), and the 1947 addition to the Fairbury High School (NR '99). The firm continued the practice of designing new buildings for the University of Nebraska, including the 1937 Student Activities building (now student union) and designed religious buildings such as the Westminster Presbyterian Church and Temple B'nai Jeshurun mentioned above. Best known for its design of public buildings, Davis and Wilson also designed numerous residential properties and several commercial properties that have become landmarks in Lincoln including the Gold and Company Store (NR '82) and the Stuart Office and Theatre Building (NR pending).

Forced into early retirement for health reasons in 1931, Wilson continued operating the firm through the Depression. After nearly closing the firm in 1942, increasing military contracts replaced private commissions and Davis rejoined Wilson. Following the war, Davis and Wilson continued their practice of designing a broad range of public and commercial properties⁸. Davis began designing the subject of this nomination by 1950, and its construction was completed in 1953.

The Building

The Nebraska State Historical Society Building must also be counted among the most prominent buildings built in Lincoln during the 1950's, and is without question one of the more daring architecturally. One definition of Modern Movement architecture is architecture that borrows from, but does not necessarily follow, the so-called Modern Architecture forms from earlier in the Twentieth Century, such as Prairie, Art Moderne, Art Deco, Bauhaus and International. The NSHS Building is obviously designed in a modern form, but its design does not lend itself to uncomplicated categorization.

A number of the Building's architectural design elements reflect the influence of a few of these immensely influential (and sometimes controversial) styles of architecture. The curved bay and rounded lettering on the top course of limestone lightly reflect the Moderne style. The almost harsh horizontal, rectangular configuration of the Building coupled with its

⁷ Edward F. Zimmer, "Davis and Wilson" in David Wishart (ed.) *Encyclopedia of the Great Plains*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. In press (2004).

⁸ Ibid.

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stark coloring and lack of ornamentation may be seen to shadow elements of the Bauhaus and International styles, which in turn had borrowed from the Prairie style. In any event, the NSHS Building is one that is immediately recognizable as a classic 1950's institutional/commercial architectural form. This classicality makes the NSHS building architecturally significant in its own right. However if one studies the building further and takes a broader view to include the Building's siting and location, one sees that the building's design is very thoughtful indeed, and one of the more inspired in Lincoln.

The 1922-32 Nebraska State Capitol Building is located seven blocks due south of the NSHS Building at the opposite end of Centennial Mall, which was 15th Street when both buildings were constructed. The Capitol Building is an architectural wonder, a National Historic Landmark. Rising over four hundred feet above the plains, the Capitol is a work of art in its own right. Appearing as a slender, domed tower, the Capitol was designed in a manner that intentionally made light and angles part of the experience of observation. Even from a distance-say seven blocks or so-shadow lines, curves, angles, prominences and recesses all work harmoniously to create a visual feast. Viewed from the perspective of the NSHS Building's design, the exterior of the Capitol is a riot of inlaid sculpture, inscribed poetry, ornamentation and cunning artwork. Though all four primary entrances are grand to some degree, the north entry, the entry facing the NSHS building, is a monumental work of stone sculpture, an immense staircase and grand doorways.

Ellery Davis understood that the Capitol was the State of Nebraska's architectural pride and joy. He was also given direction by the State Historical Society's Executive Board to design a modern building. The Board's intent was to make a statement, through the architecture of the new building, that the State Historical Society's mission was relevant to the modern Nebraskan. At the Building's dedication on September 27, 1953, Dr. James C. Olson, Superintendent of the State Historical Society said:

"The location of the building here at 1500 R Street, we feel is particularly fortunate. It provides a link between the University of Nebraska, surely one of our great sources of hope for the future, and the State Capitol, the symbol of our strength as a self-governing people. Constructed of Indiana limestone, the building was designed to provide an architectural link between the buildings of the University and the capitol. The principle purpose (of the design) was to try to show ...that our Nebraska history is not something to be set aside and looked at simply as a curiosity but is a part of our living heritage as Nebraskans and as Americans."⁹

Situated as the building site was, directly opposite the Capitol (which was only twenty years old at the time), Davis faced a challenging problem: creating a new, modern structure that would forever be visually linked with the Capitol. Given the architectural trends of the era, it was impossible for Davis to design a monumental, classical building that could compete with the Capitol for ostentation and still meet his directive to design a modern building. An examination of Davis's approach shows that he chose to directly contrast his new building with the Capitol instead of attempting to compete with its design. Davis made that contrast so absolute, save for one important element--the Indiana limestone--that he created an almost perfect foil to the Capitol's presence.

The NSHS Building has an obvious horizontal nature. The horizontal feel of the NSHS Building is created by a number of elements, including a horizontal row of windows and a lack of any ornamentation which could soften the horizontality of the Building. The curved bay tends to accentuate, rather than alleviate, the overall horizontal feel to the Building. This is accomplished by breaking up what would otherwise have been a monolithic, and thereby somewhat looming, primary façade. Another design element that reflects a conscious effort to create a design contrast to the Capitol is the smooth exterior finish of the Building and thin mortar joints whose color and configuration create a nearly seamless effect,

⁹ James C. Olson, Nebraska State Historical Society Building dedication speech, given September 27, 1953).

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especially at a distance. In any event, this distinctive horizontal visual effect and lack of ornamentation is the antithesis of the Capitol's towering presence and busy exterior finish.

The Capitol's massive grand north entry finds its opposite image in the design of the NSHS Building's main entry. Where the Capitol entrance pushes outward, reaching out to the observer, the NSHS Building's entrance pulls the observer's eye inward. The recessed entry, dark marble flanking panels, flanking staircase and glass doors create an environment that pulls an observer's eye into the interior of the Building: the darkly recessed rotunda and the irreplaceable collections within.

The use of limestone cut from the same Indiana quarry as the stone for the State Capitol serves as a profound statement that none of the antithetical design elements are accidental. The use of identical stone completes the symbiosis of building design that elegantly directs an observer to understand that these two buildings are part of the same story. Although the buildings do not share identical roles, their place with the people of Nebraska springs from the same root. The use of the Indiana limestone also perfectly caps the story that Ellery Davis was trying to tell through the building's bold design. That story was about the State Historical Society and the irreplaceable treasures held within its new building's walls: that the "living heritage" and history of the people of Nebraska as embodied by the State Historical Society retained a relevancy in 1953, a relevancy that continues to this day.

The Nebraska State Historical Society Building embodies the long-term and long-sought goals of the Society's Executive Board and Superintendent¹⁰. The State Historical Society is among the oldest functioning State agencies, and has a purpose and role vital to the interests of the people of the State of Nebraska. The acquisition, conservation and interpretation of Nebraska's cultural heritage, as well as the political mandate to accomplish these tasks are objectives the NSHS has endeavored to accomplish since its founding. Construction and completion of the Nebraska State Historical Society Building was a significant achievement in the accomplishment of this mission.

These goals could have been accomplished by constructing a vast neo-classical monolith that attempted to overwhelm its site or, alternatively, could have been accomplished by the construction of a simple, cinder-block cube of a building. However, the collaboration of the Society's Superintendent Dr. James C. Olson, the Society's Executive Board and Ellery Lothrop Davis resulted in a building that was a state-of-the-art facility that also made an unmistakable statement as to the relevancy of the State Historical Society and its place in Nebraska's cultural and political landscape.

¹⁰ The Executive Board was replaced by a Board of Trustees and the Superintendent by a Director in 1994.

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Bibliography

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Articles of Incorporation of the State Historical and Library Association, September 26, 1867. Case file of the *State Historical and Library Association vs the City of Lincoln* filed in the Nebraska Supreme Court on February 24, 1882.

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Verbal Boundary Description

South 137 feet of lots 26 and 27 S.W. Little's Subdivision, Lincoln, Lancaster County, Nebraska

Boundary Justification

This nomination includes all the space historically occupied by the Nebraska State Historical Society Building.

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Photographs

The following information pertains to the first 15 photographs:

Nebraska State Historical Society Building

Lancaster County, Nebraska

Photographer: Stacy Stupka-Burda, NeSHPO

March 2003

Negatives in the collection of the Nebraska State Historic Preservation Office

Photograph	Description of Photograph	View
1 of 17	View of Nebraska State Historical Society Building, 1500 R St	N
2 of 17	View of Nebraska State Historical Society Building, 1500 R St	N
3 of 17	View of Nebraska State Historical Society Building, 1500 R St	NE
4 of 17	View of Nebraska State Historical Society Building, 1500 R St	NW
5 of 17	View of front entry	NNE
6 of 17	View of rear façade, glass block windows in stacks area	SW
7 of 17	View of rear facade	S
8 of 17	View of first floor hallway	E
9 of 17	View of first floor hallway	W
10 of 17	View of staircase	S
11 of 17	View of office space on 2 nd floor	E
12 of 17	View of office space on 2 nd floor	SE
13 of 17	View of 2 nd floor conference room	W
14 of 17	View of 3 rd floor stacks	E
15 of 17	View of state capitol building from the Nebraska State Historical Society Building	S
16 of 17	View of state capitol building	S
17 of 17	View of Nebraska State Historical Society Building & surrounds	N
18 of 21	View of 1 st floor rotunda from entryway	N
19 of 21	View of 1 st floor rotunda from interior 1 st floor hall	S
20 of 21	View of 1 st floor rotunda, west side	N-NW
21 of 21	View of 1 st floor rotunda, east side	N-NE

Supplemental Photos

Photograph	Description of Photograph	View
1 of 2	Panoramic view of 1 st floor rotunda	N
2 of 3	Panoramic view of 1 st floor rotunda (in color)	N

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Description of historic photos (photocopies):

Photographer: M. L. Huber, Construction Foreman for Olson Construction during the construction of the Nebraska State Historical Society Building
1952

Original photographs on file, Nebraska State Historical Society

Photograph	Description of Historic Photograph	View
1 of 3	Nebraska State Historical Building under construction	NE
2 of 3	Nebraska State Historical Building under construction	N
3 of 3	Nebraska State Historical Building under construction; view of construction crew	N

Historic Postcard - n.d. (photocopy)

Original on file, Nebraska State Historical Society

1 of 1	View of Nebraska State Historical Building	NE
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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
EVALUATION/RETURN SHEET

REQUESTED ACTION: NOMINATION

PROPERTY NAME: Nebraska State Historical Society Building

MULTIPLE NAME:

STATE & COUNTY: NEBRASKA, Lancaster

DATE RECEIVED: 7/07/03 DATE OF PENDING LIST: 7/23/03
DATE OF 16TH DAY: 8/08/03 DATE OF 45TH DAY: 8/21/03
DATE OF WEEKLY LIST:

REFERENCE NUMBER: 03000797

REASONS FOR REVIEW:

APPEAL: N DATA PROBLEM: N LANDSCAPE: N LESS THAN 50 YEARS: N
OTHER: N PDIL: N PERIOD: N PROGRAM UNAPPROVED: N
REQUEST: N SAMPLE: N SLR DRAFT: N NATIONAL: N

COMMENT WAIVER: N

ACCEPT RETURN REJECT 8/21/03 DATE

ABSTRACT/SUMMARY COMMENTS:

Entered in the
National Register

RECOM./CRITERIA _____

REVIEWER _____ DISCIPLINE _____

TELEPHONE _____ DATE _____

DOCUMENTATION see attached comments Y/N see attached SLR Y/N