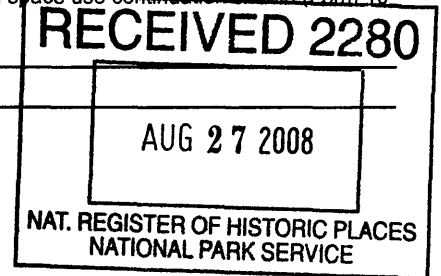


## NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES REGISTRATION FORM

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 requested information. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, styles, materials, and areas of significance, enter only the categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900a). Type all entries.



### 1. Name of Property

historic name United States Court House and Custom House 964

other names/site number John A. Campbell United States Courthouse

### 2. Location

street & number 113 St. Joseph Street

city, town Mobile vicinity of N/A

county Mobile code 097

state Alabama code AL zip code 36602-3606

not for publication

### 3. Classification

#### Ownership of Property:

- private
- public-local
- public-state
- public-federal

#### Category of Property:

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

#### Number of Resources within Property:

#### Contributing

#### Noncontributing

buildings  
sites  
structures  
objects  
total

1

Contributing resources previously listed in the National Register:  N/A

Name of previous listing:  N/A

Name of related multiple property listing:  N/A



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## 6. Function or Use

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**Historic Functions:** GOVERNMENT / courthouse  
GOVERNMENT/ custom house  
GOVERNMENT / government office

**Current Functions:** GOVERNMENT / courthouse  
GOVERNMENT / government office

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## 7. Description

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**Architectural Classification:** LATE 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY REVIVALS / Neo-Classical Revival  
LATE 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY REVIVALS / Renaissance Revival  
MODERN MOVEMENT / Modern Classic  
MODERN MOVEMENT / Art Deco

### Materials:

**foundation** STONE / granite  
**walls** STONE / limestone; BRICK  
**roof** OTHER / built-up coal tar  
**other** METAL / bronze; iron; aluminum

### Description of present and historic physical appearance:

The United States Court House and Custom House was designed by the Mobile architectural firm of Carey and Dowling and constructed in Mobile's central business district between 1933 and 1934. Between 1939 and 1940, an addition was constructed to the west, which was designed by Louis Simon, Supervising Architect of the U.S. Department of the Treasury.

This building was designed for a dual purpose, housing both the United States Customs Service and the United States Courts. Thus, the location for the building, near the Alabama State docks and in the city's central business district, was a strategic choice. From its inception, the building has functioned as a Courthouse and Federal office building while also housing other Federal agencies.

The entire building is situated on the northeast corner of the downtown Mobile city block bound by St. Joseph Street to the east, St. Louis Street to the north, St. Michael Street to the south and Conception Street to the west. This five story, 146,000 square foot building sits prominently on the corner of St. Joseph and St. Louis Streets and occupies approximately 1.8 acres of land on this city block.

When the United States Court House and Custom House site was acquired in the early 1930's, the United States Post Office (ca. 1916) occupied the site immediately to the south bound by St. Joseph and St. Michael Streets. This building was demolished in 1968 and a new nine-story Federal building was constructed in its place. The remaining portion of this block to the west is currently occupied by a parking garage that serves both the Federal building and Courthouse. The garage extends the full length of the block along Conception Street between St. Louis Street and St. Michael Street.

Surrounding the building on adjacent blocks are other businesses occupying buildings of low to mid-rise. Some areas have also been cleared for parking lots. To the east of the building, on the opposite side of St. Joseph Street, is a four-story bank, a parking lot and a vacant building two to three stories in height. To the south, on the corners of St. Michael and St. Joseph Streets are two mid-rise bank buildings, each between 15

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### Section 7--Description

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and 20 stories in height. To the north along St. Louis, there is a four-story building occupying the northeast corner of the intersection of St. Joseph Street and St. Louis Street. Directly opposite the United States Court House and Custom House to the north, is a small one-story building flanked by two surface parking lots. This block is currently under consideration for the construction of a new Federal building. To the west opposite Conception Street, are several low-rise buildings, including one which houses the General Services Administration offices at the southwest corner where Conception Street meets St. Michael Street. The De Tonti Square Historic District is located just a couple of blocks northwest of this building.

The building is characterized by its massive rectilinear form, modestly detailed wall surfaces with setbacks at the upper floors, flat roofs, and carved ornament. The building form and massing is somewhat characteristic of the Modern Classic federal architecture of the 1930s which typically exhibited walls with very little ornament that progressively stepped back in a sequence of terraces. This building, however, also exhibits both Neo-Classical Revival and Renaissance Revival characteristics in the symmetrical classical detailing of its elevations and the deliberate delineation between floor levels.

The building's primary elevations face east and north, with the main entrance located on the east side along St. Joseph Street. These two elevations mark the corner of St. Joseph and St. Louis Streets and are prominently displayed toward the surrounding city-scape. The south and west elevations are secondary to the north and east, as they are less visible to the public. Thus, their wall surfaces are treated with less emphasis and detail.

The original building footprint had a U-shaped configuration surrounding a light court to the west. When the addition was constructed, the open end of the light court was enclosed the full height of the building, so that the light court was visible only from within the interior walls of the building. The first floor of the light court was also enclosed and currently houses mechanical equipment for the building. Buff brick clads the light court walls. The windows of the light court are similar to those on the exterior elevations and are recessed within the wall. Anodized aluminum one-by-one casements with a combination of transoms, sidelights and hoppers rest on limestone sills.

The base of the building is clad in granite, from which five floors of smooth limestone ashlar wall surfaces rise. The building mass is divided horizontally into four parts. The first floor serves as the base of the building and is delineated from the upper floors by a continuous molded stringcourse that rests between the first and second floor levels. An unembellished entablature and denticulated molding separates the third and fourth floors, defining the middle section of the building. Above this, rises the fourth floor, which is detailed with a simple molded cornice along the base of the parapet wall above. The parapet wall is detailed with a glyphed design accented at intervals with raised five-point stars. These are aligned in a repetitious pattern with the wall areas between the window bays. These four floors are thirteen bays wide along the east elevation and eighteen bays wide along the north elevation. The fifth floor is stepped back from the plane of the others, defining the uppermost section of the building. This floor is eleven bays wide along the east elevation and seventeen bays wide along the north elevation. The wall surfaces at this level are unornamented and merge seamlessly with the roof parapet. A penthouse and attic rise above the fifth floor roof-line to the east and west respectively. Both are brick with limestone parapets.

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In general, the primary north and east elevations are characterized by similar detailing. All of the windows are recessed in limestone surrounds with limestone sills. Cast bronze spandrel panels separate the second and third floor windows. Each panel is detailed with a vine motif, flanked by fluted ornament and surrounded by a reeded border and chevron designs. Fluted ionic pilasters accent the walls between the second and third floor windows, rising to an unembellished entablature that wraps around the building elevations between the third and fourth floors. This is accented with a continuous denticulated molding separating the architrave and the frieze. Within the frieze and centered across the east elevation are the incised words "United States Court House and Custom House". A panel of relief-work displaying designs of foliage flanked by two carved rosettes decorates the frieze on either side of these words. These third floor windows are further accented with a glyphed band of ornament above each window and between the pilaster capitals across the east and north elevations. Centered above each window within the glyphed pattern is a carved star-burst design. Similar detailing is depicted at the fourth floor level, but in a more simplified manner and at a smaller scale. A repetitious pattern of pilasters separates the window openings across this level. The windows themselves are configured the same as those on the lower levels, but are shorter, giving the illusion of greater height to the building.

In addition to these details, the east elevation displays even more enriched detailing of the wall surfaces, distinguishing it from the other elevations. In the middle section of the building on the east elevation, at the second and third floor levels, the windows are grouped into three bays set apart from one another by an unfenestrated stone field. The center bay consists of five openings within the wall separated by fluted Doric pilasters. Each of the five windows rests on a limestone spandrel panel at the second floor level depicting carved symbols of the agencies that originally occupied this building. Their designs are positioned in a symmetrical pattern with the center panel displaying a United States shield and American eagle. The shield and eagle are surrounded by a laurel wreath design and flanked by a bundled axe motif. Flanking the center panel are two identical panels detailed with the scales of justice. Similar laurel wreath detailing and bundled axe motifs are also used to accent the panel borders. The outer-most panels display a carved design of the lamp of knowledge.

The end bays on this elevation are grouped in threes. These window openings are taller and lack the stone panels displayed across the center bay. Instead, ornamental bronze spandrels accent the areas between the second and third floor windows of these bays. Fluted Doric pilasters also separate these window openings. The stone fields flanking the central window bay of this mid-section are adorned with two flagpoles mounted to the walls at the base of the second floor. Directly above each flagpole is a carved medallion recessed within a glyphed octagon. The medallion to the south depicts the United States Department of Justice seal. The medallion to the north displays a Latin inscription and the scales of justice.

The north elevation is detailed similarly to the east elevation, but lacks the additional ornament that accentuates the center bay on the east elevation. On the north elevation, the division between the original building and the 1939 addition is marked by a monumental iron gate that opens to a service drive between the two buildings at the ground level. The opening is three bays wide and located just west of center. The gate itself is slightly arched and depicts stylized Art Deco designs of scrollwork and fretwork. If not for this gate, the building walls would appear seamless with almost no distinction between the original building and the addition.

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The south and west elevations are secondary elevations and, therefore, lack much of the ornamentation exhibited on the primary east and north elevations. The general massing and rhythm across the south elevation mirrors the north. The basic beltcourses, entablature and parapet walls continue across this elevation, but no additional wall ornament is present. The bronze spandrel panels decorating the area between the second and third floor windows appears to be the only ornamentation carried through to this elevation.

The west elevation overlooks the parking garage built along Conception Street at the rear portion of the block. This elevation is essentially stripped of all ornament. The moldings and cornices of the adjacent elevations wrap around the end bays of the west elevation, but the walls are otherwise smooth planar surfaces with little detailing. Limestone surfaces are carried across the end bays, but the broad middle section is surfaced in brick masonry. Smooth limestone beltcourses mimic the moldings and cornices on the other elevations above the first, third and fourth floor levels. The attic rises directly from this central section giving the appearance of a sixth floor level. The attic houses additional mechanical equipment for the building including the original air handlers that serviced the second floor west courtroom - reportedly the first air conditioned courtroom in the United States.

The original windows in this building were replaced in 1983 with anodized aluminum windows. Most are casement units framed by transoms, sidelights and hopper panels. The second and third floor units are taller than the others. This is visually exaggerated by the use of the spandrel panels that separate the second and third floor windows, giving the fenestration at these levels a continuous vertical appearance. The fourth and fifth floor window assemblies are slightly smaller, and the attic units lack the transom light. The windows of the light court are similar to those on the exterior elevations and are recessed within the wall resting on limestone sills.

The main entrance to the building is centered on the east elevation. Granite steps join with the city sidewalk and rise to a covered exterior vestibule at the building's first floor level. The steps are flanked by broad stone cheek walls. These walls were once adorned with a single massive light standard mounted to each that served to accentuate the entry both functionally and ornamentally. These have since been removed, but each light standard originally consisted of a single cylindrical pillar and star-shaped lantern. The main entry is three bays wide and exhibits no ornament or embellished detailing to emphasize its presence. Rather, three simple rectangular portals, aligned vertically with the windows above, provide passage through a deeply recessed threshold to the main entry doors of the building. This threshold serves as an exterior vestibule and features granite flooring, limestone walls and a plaster ceiling. Original suspended globes illuminate this area at night. Three sets of paired bronze and glass doors provide access to the main entry vestibule of the building.

A secondary entrance is located toward the west end of the north elevation beyond the iron gate. Reeded granite cheek walls flank a set of granite stairs. These rise to a recessed aluminum paneled entry vestibule. The opening to the vestibule is surrounded by a limestone jamb detailed with a reeded design. Paired bronze doors similar to those at the main east entry provide access to the building. Massive lanterns are mounted to the wall flanking the entry.

The interior spaces of the building were originally organized in a U-shaped configuration about a central light court which opened to the west. When the addition was constructed in 1939, the open end of the light court

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was enclosed and the interior hallways were connected at the west end of the building to service the new spaces on each floor. Thus, a rectangular pattern of circulation was generally established for each floor.

A central lobby on the east side of the first floor serves as the anchor around which other spaces are organized. Hallways join the lobby perpendicularly at each end of the space and extend west along the north and south sides of the building. Offices and other tenant areas are organized in a double-loaded manner about these horizontal axes. Two stairwells connect the floors vertically. One is located within the original building near the south end of the main lobby. The other is located within the addition at the northwest corner of the building and adjacent to the northeast entry lobby.

The second floor is anchored at the east and west ends by the two primary courtrooms serving this building. Support spaces for the courtroom activities, including the court lobbies and judge's suites are situated immediately adjacent to the courtrooms. Double-loaded corridors along the north and south connect the spaces at each end of the building with tenant spaces filling the area in between. The upper floors are organized in a similar manner with double-loaded corridors circulating in a continuous rectangular shape around the central light court.

Areas of most significance remaining inside the building include the main lobby and entry vestibule, the second floor west courtroom, lobby and judge's suite (added in 1939-40), and the second floor east courtroom lobby. In general, the integrity of these areas has been retained and their original character-defining features remain visible and in good condition. Spaces of lesser distinction but still significant to the overall character of the building include the second floor east courtroom, the hallways throughout the building and the northwest stairwell.

The entry vestibule and lobby are located on the east side of the building. Three sets of paired wood doors connect the two spaces while also buffering outside noises from the main public lobby. Fixed glazed panels in the doors and transoms above provide transparency between the two spaces. The vestibule is three bays wide and broadens to nine bays upon entering the lobby which extends north to south. Both areas are finished with similar materials and detailing and retain their original integrity.

Floors throughout the main lobby and entry vestibule are terrazzo accented with a double marble border, one in white and one in pink. Imitation travertine marble clads the modestly detailed walls. Corbeled pilasters accentuate the planar wall surfaces and emphasize the three and nine bay rhythm of the vestibule and lobby respectively. These pilasters support a simplified frieze that runs continuously throughout both spaces. The ceilings consist of corbeled plaster panels. Doors throughout the lobby are walnut, set within recessed panels and surrounded by corbeled imitation travertine. These doors are original and each is detailed with a single corbeled panel in the center. Other original features include the office directory mounted on the lobby wall and the cast iron grilles in the vestibule, set within the travertine panels at the north and south walls. A portrait of John A. Campbell, for whom the building is currently named, is prominently located in the lobby and hung on the west wall of the center most bay.

The west courtroom is located on the second floor at the west side of the building. The judge's chambers is located adjacent to the courtroom at the southwest corner of the building. Access to the courtroom is provided through a small lobby and hallway to the northwest. The walls of the lobby area are accented with marble

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wainscot. Doors to the courtroom are also located along the east wall of the space and connect with a second hallway running north to south across the building. Single over-sized wood pocket doors open from the hallways to paired leather-covered fly doors that buffer the courtroom activities from those in adjacent spaces. The fly doors are surrounded by corbeled wood moldings. Flanking the judge's bench on the south wall are two single wood doors. Each is detailed with eight slightly recessed panels displaying a single wood disk in each panel. The door to the east opens to a narrow stair leading up to a jury room located on a mezzanine level. This space is also original and retains its plaster walls, wood chair rail and other woodwork around windows and doors. Carpeting and acoustical ceiling tiles have been introduced with modern renovations.

The west courtroom and judge's suite is noteworthy for its woodwork on the walls and surrounding the door openings. Full-height wood paneling rests on a marble base (Cardiff Green) throughout these spaces. Doorways are especially impressive with their rounded and corbeled surrounds. In the judge's suite, these appear as engaged beaded columns slightly more than quarter-round in size. In the courtroom, the surrounds are detailed in a more corbeled design. Broad stepped side panels accentuate each recessed opening. Above these doors is an architrave detailed with triglyphs.

The lowest portion of courtroom walls are detailed with paneled wood wainscot above a green marble base. The wainscot rises approximately 5'-0" above the 11" marble base and is capped with a 4" glyphed dado rail. Wood veneer panels cover the remaining wall surfaces and are laid in alternating diagonal patterns around large acoustical wall panels set symmetrically about the space. Decorative bronze grilles with fluted borders are also original features in this space. The plaster ceiling retains its original integrity as well and consists of a flat field with acoustical finish surrounded by a decorative cornice of acanthus leaves.

Courtroom furniture throughout the space is original including the judge's bench, jury box, clerk's desk and court benches. A fluted border with black wood inlay ornaments many of these wood pieces. The original cork tile floor remains in place, though currently covered with carpeting. Small areas of the original floor are visible around the north and east entries where the carpeting has been cut away. The original cork design consists of a checkered field of medium and light brown tiles surrounded by a dark brown tile border. Medium brown cork tile cut in narrow strips is used as ornament within the darker border.

The judge's suite to the south also retains its original integrity and is similarly detailed to the adjacent courtroom in which it serves. It too is detailed with cork tile floors and wood veneer on the walls. The original flooring, however, is covered by carpeting. The doors in this space are wood with four slightly recessed panels. Each panel displays a diamond shape in a wood of subtle contrast to the surrounding surfaces. Walnut veneer covers the full height of the walls. The east and west walls are accented with a raised panel and semi-circular fan design. Other noteworthy features in this area include the original copper-finished cone-shaped wall sconces in each corner of the room. They are identical to one another and feature a fluted body that illuminates upward. The library and reception area, included in the judge's suite, also retain original features of significance including panel wood wainscot, wood shelving and crown molding.

The second floor courtroom on the east side of the building was originally the ceremonial courtroom for the building when it was constructed in 1933. When the addition was built in 1939, and a new courtroom added on the west side of the building, the original ceremonial courtroom was converted to open plan offices and related spaces for use by the Customs Service. In the 1960s, this space was renovated and converted back



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to its original intended use as a courtroom. The current finishes in this space are not historically significant. However, the integrity of the space itself has been retained and represents the significance of the Federal court in the overall layout of the building plan. The adjacent court lobby to the west does retain most of its original features and finishes. These include terrazzo floors, walnut wainscot (approximately 3'-6" high) above an 8" Cardiff Green marble base, plaster walls and ceiling, and wood moldings around windows and doors. A simple wood cornice further accentuates the door openings throughout the court lobby and hallway and at the elevator doors. Two sets of original wood pocket doors connect the court lobby with the courtroom. Each door is detailed with a single corbeled panel, characteristic of other original detailing throughout the building.

The hallways throughout the building are generally organized in a rectangular configuration, providing double-loaded access to offices and courtrooms on each floor. There are two exceptions to this - one on the first floor and one on the second. On the first floor, this occurs at the service drive built between the original building and the addition, which interrupts the contiguous flow of circulation. On the second floor, the south section of the original hallway has been claimed as part of the office suite along this side of the building. The original configurations have been retained on the third, fourth and fifth floors. On the second, third and fifth floors, the east and west sections of hallway run directly adjacent to the light court, allowing natural light to stream into these areas.

Except for the second floor courtroom lobbies and hallways adjacent to those courtrooms, the hallways throughout the building are modestly detailed, though original finishes have been retained. Floors throughout the hallways are generally terrazzo with a pink marble border. The walls are flat plaster with a grey marble base. Wall covering has been added on some walls and suspended acoustical ceiling tiles have been introduced throughout most areas. Wood base boards have also been introduced on the fifth floor. Many of the doors throughout the hallways are original mahogany with a panel of obscure glazing set within a mahogany frame. Marble plinth blocks accent the base of the frames. Other original features in the hallways include the mail chutes which are located near the northeast corner of the hallways on each floor.

Two stair wells in the building provided vertical access between the floors. One is located in the northwest corner of the building. The other is located adjacent to the southeast corner of the light court. Two passenger elevators are located opposite this latter stair at the northeast corner of the light court. A single passenger elevator is located adjacent to the northwest stair.

The stairwell at the northwest corner of the building was constructed with the addition but is more elaborately finished - particularly between the first and second floors. Between these first two levels, the curved walls of the stair are covered with a white marble wainscot and accented with a Cardiff green dado rail. The stair stringers and treads are Cardiff green marble with white marble risers, and the balustrade is iron with a polished brass railing. A similar polished brass handrail is mounted to the wainscot between these two floors. Above the second floor, the richness of the finishes in the stair well diminishes. The tread and landing materials change to green terrazzo, while the risers and stringers are simply painted iron. The balustrade remains the same except that a wood railing is used instead of brass. In contrast to the detailing of the stair in the addition, the stairwell in the original building is more utilitarian in appearance and consists of painted steel risers and treads and a simple iron baluster capped with a wood railing.

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Interior renovations in the 1960s, 70s and onward have resulted in the introduction of modern finishes and features throughout all tenant areas in the building, excluding those described above. New courtrooms and judge's suite have been added on all floors to accommodate the growing needs of the Federal courts. Contemporary finishes including carpeting, acoustical ceiling tiles, vinyl wall covering, wood base boards and chair rails are typical throughout these areas. Some of the courtrooms and judge's suites feature full-height wood paneling on the walls, but this too is a contemporary addition. Original wood window sills do remain throughout the tenant areas and some original doors have been retained in scattered locations.

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## 8. Statement of Significance

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**Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:**

nationally  statewide  locally

**Applicable National Register Criteria:**

A  B  C  D

**Criteria Considerations (Exceptions):**  N/A

A  B  C  D  E  F  G

**Areas of Significance (enter categories from instructions):**

ARCHITECTURE

**Period of Significance:** 1933 - 1940 (period of construction)

**Significant Dates:** 1933-1934 - original construction  
1939-1940 - construction of addition

**Significant Person(s):**  N/A

**Cultural Affiliation:**  N/A

**Architect(s)/Builder(s):** Carey and Dowling, Architects  
Louis Simon, Supervising Architect of the U.S. Department of the Treasury

### **Narrative Statement of Significance**

The United States Court House and Custom House, built between 1933 and 1940, is strategically located in the central business district of Mobile near the Alabama state docks. Designed by the local architectural firm of Carey and Dowling, this building stands as a symbol of the Federal presence in Mobile while serving as an fine example of Federal architecture of the 1930s.<sup>1</sup> The building is significant in American history and architecture and possesses integrity of design, materials, and workmanship. It qualifies for listing in the National Register for its significance under Criterion C in the area of architecture and serves as a good example of the Modern Classic style of architecture using a combination of Neo-Classical Revival, Renaissance Revival and Art Deco inspired detailing.

Mobile is one of America's oldest port cities and Alabama's only Gulf port. The role of the Custom House was important in port cities like Mobile because revenue from commerce across international seas was a significant source of income for the Federal government. This was especially true prior to the establishment of

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<sup>1</sup> "Building Preservation Plan - John A Campbell United States Courthouse", p. 2.

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### Section 8--Statement of Significance

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the Federal Income Tax in 1916. Duty taxes were collected on foreign goods entering through the Mobile Bay. The Customs Service's operations were administered from the United States Court House and Custom House on St. Joseph Street in the early years of the building's construction. The Federal courts were also housed in this building for which it was primarily designed.

The Customs Service later vacated the building and the Federal courts expanded their operations. Upon this shift to predominantly courts-related activities, the United States Court House and Custom House was later renamed the John A. Campbell United States Courthouse in honor of John Archibald Campbell, Associate Justice of the United States Supreme Court between 1853 and 1861. Having served for eight years on the Supreme Court, Campbell resigned from his position in 1861 when Alabama seceded from the Union. A granite wall with a bronze plaque recognizing John A. Campbell is located on the east lawn at the south side of the entry stairs. To the north of these stairs is another stone wall that states the current building name John Archibald Campbell United States Courthouse. The Federal Courts have occupied this building since its inception and continue to serve the citizens of Mobile and the surrounding areas in this capacity.

The United States Court House and Custom House was originally constructed adjacent to the United States Post Office, which occupied the southern half of the same city block. The Post Office was built between 1914 and 1916 and was Mobile's best example of Beaux-Arts Neo-Renaissance Style.<sup>2</sup> It was not a tall building, only two stories in height. However, it stood prominently in the city's central business district displaying its Italian Renaissance characteristics influenced by Brunelleschi's Florentine Foundling Hospital (1419-1421). It consisted of a rectangular main block (nine bays by five bays) over a basement with a ceramic tile hipped roof and widely overhanging eaves. A vaulted loggia distinguished the main elevation along St. Joseph Street.<sup>3</sup> When the United States Court House and Custom House was constructed, it rose above the Post Office at least three or four stories, giving the Court House a more prominent appearance on this block.

The close proximity of these government buildings to one another established a strong Federal presence in Mobile's downtown area. The Post Office building was demolished in 1968 for the construction of a new nine-story Federal building on this site. This Federal building continues to occupy the site and maintains the functional integrity of the Federal complex originally established for this central city block.

At the turn of the century, public money was predominantly spent on additions and extensions rather than new construction. Small commercial buildings were being constructed, generally two to three stories in height. Other buildings were either renovated with new facades, torn down or rebuilt.<sup>4</sup> Government-sponsored buildings of the 1930s, however, were often monumental structures of substantial mass. Civic buildings during this time period were occupying larger lots - sprawling out more horizontally in an L, U, H or E-shaped plan in order to provide sufficient illumination and ventilation to the interior spaces of the building.<sup>5</sup> This was typically

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<sup>2</sup> "The Alabama Catalog: HABS: A Guide to the Early Architecture of the State", p. 317.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 317.

<sup>4</sup> "From Fort to Port", p. 229, 237.

<sup>5</sup> "A Field Guide to American Architecture", p. 218.

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true of taller buildings. Lower-rise civic buildings were often organized around distinct axes that structured the arrangement of spaces.<sup>6</sup> The architectural firm of Carey and Dowling designed this building using a combination of both principles. The nation's Supervising Architect at that time was Louis Simon.

The original building was U-shaped in plan with a central light court to the rear (west) extending the full five stories in height. The main lobby and the ceremonial courtroom on the second floor were centrally located at the east end of the building and were the primary functions within the building around which other interior spaces were planned. These secondary areas were organized around double-loaded corridors that fed into these central spaces. Within five years of the building's construction, the building was extended and an addition was constructed to the west. Also five stories in height, the walls of the addition joined seamlessly with the original building along its exterior elevations, but preserved the light court within the building shell. The double-loaded corridors were extended as well to form a continuous rectangular pattern of circulation on the upper levels. Within the addition, a new (air-conditioned) courtroom was constructed opposite the original ceremonial courtroom on the second floor. This floor was significant in the overall planning of the building design, as courts-related activities were anchored at each end of the building to the east and west. In subsequent years, the west courtroom became the "ceremonial courtroom" for the building as the original courtroom was claimed for alternative office uses. Eventually, in conjunction with changing tenant needs, the east courtroom was returned to its original function. Courts-related activities continue to be administered from this space.

This United States Court House and Custom House is a combination of several styles that contribute jointly to the overall character of the building. The building's austere massing and solid, blocky form is a characteristic common to the Modern-Classic style of architecture, which was a popular style for government-sponsored buildings during the nineteen-thirties. This style is also characterized by smooth planar wall surfaces, subtly accented with low relief detailing and minimal ornament in simplified classical forms. A general expression of verticality is often emphasized and conveyed through the treatment of the windows and surrounding wall surfaces. The United States Court House and Custom House exhibits these characteristics in conjunction with those of other architectural styles in an overlapping manner to delineate floor levels and accentuate wall surfaces. Renaissance Revival and Neo-Classical Revival styles of detailing are layered together to establish the general proportioning of the building, while also decorating the building's broad, expansive, planar wall surfaces with ornamental designs and features. Art Deco-inspired detailing, popular between 1925 and 1940, is also represented in the use of faceted surfaces, chevrons and octagon shaped ornament detailing the walls, spandrel panels and beltcourses of this building. The ornamental ironwork of the gate separating the original building from the addition also suggests Art Deco influences.

Neo-Classical Revival civic buildings of this period were often monumental, stately and symmetrical. Architects drew on the classical forms and details from traditional architectural designs to detail their building elevations and interior spaces. Civic buildings during this period were typically noted for their solid, massive forms and broad, expansive planar wall surfaces.<sup>7</sup> Symmetrically balanced windows and detailing, classically-

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 219.

<sup>7</sup> "American Architecture Since 1780", p 167.

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### Section 8--Statement of Significance

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derived ornament, and a centered entry or portico were also common characteristics of this style.<sup>8</sup> The smooth planar wall surfaces of the United States Court House and Custom House exhibit these architectural characteristics in the massing, detailing, and symmetrical arrangement of its features. The wall surfaces are highlighted with decorative designs that are integrated into the stone veneer as friezes, cornices and other low-relief ornament. These features are used in a general manner to divide the building mass into horizontal sections representing a base, middle and top and provide continuity across the exterior elevations. Other details are incorporated for emphasis and accent. The fluted pilasters that are repeated across the mid-section of the building, for instance, reinforce the repetitious rhythm of the windows and express a sense of verticality, spanning two floor levels to support a continuous architrave above the third floor. The windows at the second and third floor levels also emphasize this vertical component through the use of decorative spandrel panels that reinforce this visual effect.

Another noteworthy characteristic of this building is the way in which the central interior spaces are expressed on the exterior. In plan, the main public lobby and the second floor (east) courtroom are the two primary spaces around which others are organized. This is subtly reflected on the exterior of the east elevation in the treatment of the entry, windows and ornament that detail this facade. The main entry is centered, but deeply recessed to form a vestibule three bays wide. The granite stairs accentuate the point of entry as no other wall ornament distinguishes these openings to the building. Originally, ornamental light standards accented the cheek walls flanking the main entry stairs. The second floor courtroom is distinguished by the grouping and detailing of the windows at the second and third floor levels. A deliberate interruption in the repetitious rhythm of the windows divides the wall area at these floor levels into three sections. The middle section is five bays wide and corresponds with the height and length of the courtroom space inside. The flanking sections are each three bays wide. Stone veneer details the bays separating the three sections instead of the typical fenestration. This area is further elaborated with carved stonework and wall-mounted flagpoles placed in a symmetrical design. The presence of the courtroom is further emphasized on the east elevation's middle bays through the detailing of carved stone panels positioned below the second floor windows. The center panel depicts a United States Shield and American Eagle. This is flanked by similar carved panels depicting the scales of justice and the lamp of knowledge. Finally, the incised words "United States Court House and Custom House" are centered in the frieze above the middle five bays.

Characteristics of the Renaissance Revival style are evident but are more general in nature and overlap somewhat with those of the Neo-Classical Revival. Some of these characteristics are conveyed through the building's symmetrical facades, recessed entries, and the distinction of a solid base course on which the building rests. Others are revealed through the use of pilasters spanning several floor levels, trabeated fenestration, continuous cornice and roof line details, and parapet walls.

The United States Court House and Custom House served as a civic icon around which other Federal and commercial construction developed over the years. This includes the Federal Building (formerly the United States Post Office) to the south, the GSA offices to the southwest, and various commercial/retail establishments to the north and east. Currently, there are plans to build a new Federal Building opposite the Court House to the north along St. Louis Street. Schematic building designs are being reviewed for the development of the site for this purpose.

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<sup>8</sup> "A Field Guide to American Architecture", p. 217, 220.

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**Criteria Considerations (if applicable):** ( X ) N/A

**Period of significance (justification):** 1933-1940

Construction of the United States Court House and Custom House was begun in 1933 and completed in 1934. The construction of an extension to the building was begun in 1939 to accommodate the first air conditioned courtroom in the United States in addition to other needed tenant areas. This work was completed in 1940. The United States Court House and Custom House, together with the adjacent United States Post Office (ca. 1916), established a strong Federal presence in the downtown Mobile area until 1968 when the Post Office was demolished. The Federal building constructed in its place maintains this functional relationship, though the architectural integrity of this city block was compromised for more modern construction.

**Contributing/Noncontributing Resources (explanation, if necessary):** ( X ) N/A

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## 9. Major Bibliographic References

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### Bibliography

Architectural and Historical Inventory: Federal Building - U.S. Courthouse. Mobile: December, 1977.

Building Preservation Plan – John A. Campbell United States Courthouse. General Services Administration, 1997.

Clifton - Mogg, Caroline. The Neoclassical Source Book. New York: Rizzoli, 1991.

Gamble, Robert S. Historic Architecture in Alabama: A Guide to Styles and Types 1810-1930. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2001.

\_\_\_\_\_. The Alabama Catalog: Historic American Buildings Survey: A Guide to the Early Architecture of the State. University, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1987.

Gould, Elizabeth B. From Fort to Port: An Architectural History of Mobile, Alabama, 1711-1918. Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1988.

Lane, Miles. Architecture of the Old South, Mississippi - Alabama. New York: Abbeville Press, 1989.

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Rifkind, Carole. A Field Guide to American Architecture. New York: New American Library, 1980.

Whiffen, Marcus. American Architecture Since 1780, A Guide to the Styles. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1969.

Wiseman, Carter. Shaping a Nation: Twentieth-Century American Architecture and It's Makers. New York: W. W. Norton & Company Ltd., 1998.



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Section 9--Major Bibliographic References

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**Previous documentation on file (NPS):** ( X ) N/A

- ( ) preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- ( ) preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been issued  
date issued:
- ( ) 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 of additional data:**

- ( ) State historic preservation office
- ( ) Other State Agency
- ( X ) Federal agency
- ( ) Local government
- ( ) University
- ( ) Other, Specify Repository:

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## 10. Geographical Data

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**Acreeage of Property**      1.806 acres

### UTM References

A)    Zone   16                    Easting   400117                    Northing   3395930

### Verbal Boundary Description

From the Mobile County Plat Book 243, Page 410.

“...the following described real estate situate, lying and being in the City and County of Mobile, State of Alabama, more particularly described as being bounded by a line described as follows, to-wit:

Commencing at the Southwest intersection of St. Joseph and St. Louis Streets, and running thence Westwardly along the South line of St. Louis Street 149.90 feet, more or less, to a point, which is the Northeast corner of property formerly of Truwit; thence running South 22 degrees 54 minutes East 157.53 feet, more or less, along the East line of the property formerly of Truwit to a point on the North line of property of the United States of America; thence running North 68 degrees 44 minutes East along the North line of property of the United States of America 37.21 feet to a point; thence running South 73 degrees 36 minutes East along the North line of property of the United States of America 11.52 feet to a point; thence running North 65 degrees 54 minutes East along the North line of property of the United States of America, which line is marked by a granite coping, 106.24 feet, more or less, to a point on the West line of St. Joseph Street; thence running Northwardly along the West line of St. Joseph Street 157.66 feet, more or less, to the point of beginning, the said property being bounded on the North by St. Louis Street, on the West by property formerly of Truwit, on the South by property of the United States of America, and on the East by St. Joseph Street, all as more fully shown by a plat of said property hereto attached and made a part hereof, it being expressly agreed and understood that the strip of land approximately ten feet wide along the Southern line of the property hereinabove described constitutes an alleyway which is subject to use jointly by the said W. P. Lewis and by the said United States of America.”

A copy of the plat map is included with this nomination and illustrates the acquisition of the property described above. The site was surveyed and platted by Durant Engineering Company on December 7, 1932. This map is located in the Mobile County Plat Book 243, Page 414.

This property is illustrated on the accompanying USGS quadrangle map. A copy of the ownership map, illustrating the site in more detail within the context of its surrounding city blocks, is also included. This map was prepared under the direction of the State of Alabama Department of Revenue by the Mobile County Revenue Commissioners Office in 1993.

### Boundary Justification

The boundaries described above define the original property on which the United States Court House and Custom House was constructed.

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**11. Form Prepared By**

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**State Historic Preservation Office****name/title****organization****street & number****city or town state zip code****telephone date****Consulting Services/Technical Assistance (if applicable): ( ) N/A****name/title** Tara L. Johnson**organization** Architectural Conservation Center**street and number** 3318 Highway 5, #318**city or town** Douglasville **state** GA **zip code** 30135**telephone** 770-949-1337 **consultant** **regional development center preservation planner** **other:**

(HPD form version 02-24-97)

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## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

### Additional Documentation - Maps

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USGS map (7.5 series) indicating the property's location.

Survey of United States Court House and Custom House - surveyed and platted by Durant Engineering Company on December 7, 1932. This map is located in the Mobile County Plat Book 243, Page 414.

Ownership map from 1998 prepared under the direction of the State of Alabama Department of Revenue by the Mobile County Revenue Commissioners Office.

### Additional Documentation - Photographs

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**Name of Property:** United States Court House and Custom House

**City or Vicinity:** Mobile

**County:** Mobile

**State:** Alabama

**Photographer:** Tara Johnson

**Negative Filed:** John H. Myers, Architectural Conservation Center, 3318 Highway 5, #318, Douglasville, GA 30135

**Date Photographed:** May, 2002

#### Description of Photograph(s):

**Number 1:** East Elevation, St. Joseph Street

**Number 2:** Carved Spandrel Panel, East Elevation

**Number 3:** Window and Spandrel Panel Detail

**Number 4:** View from Northeast

**Number 5:** North Elevation, St. Louis Street

**Number 6:** View from Lobby toward Entry Vestibule

**Number 7:** First Floor Lobby

**Number 8:** Door and Wall Detail in First Floor Lobby

**Number 9:** Original Door Detail, First Floor

**Number 10:** Stair Detail at Northwest Corner

**Number 11:** Second Floor West Courtroom

**Number 12:** Door Detail, Second Floor West Courtroom

**Number 13:** Ceiling Detail, Second Floor West Courtroom

**Number 14:** Judge's Chambers, Second Floor Southwest Corner

**Number 15:** Door Detail, Judge's Chambers, Second Floor Southwest Corner

**Number 16:** Wall Sconce, Judge's Chambers, Second Floor Southwest Corner

**Number 17:** Second Floor Hallway Along West Courtroom