

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

2245

# National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

NOV 28 1989

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 Seward County Courthouse  
other names/site number SW09-93

## 2. Location

street & number Seward bet 5th & 6th Sts N/A not for publication  
city, town Seward N/A vicinity  
state Nebraska code NE county Seward code 159 zip code 68434

## 3. Classification

Ownership of Property	Category of Property	Number of Resources within Property		
		Contributing	Noncontributing	
<input type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> building(s)			buildings
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> public-local	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> district	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>	sites
<input type="checkbox"/> public-state	<input type="checkbox"/> site			structures
<input type="checkbox"/> public-Federal	<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<u>1</u>		objects
	<input type="checkbox"/> object	<u>2</u>	<u>1</u>	Total

Name of related multiple property listing: County Courthouses of Nebraska  
Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 1

## 4. State/Federal Agency Certification

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

James D. Hanson Signature of certifying official November 17, 1989 Date

State or Federal agency and bureau  
In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria.  See cont. sheet.

Signature of commenting or other official \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

State or Federal agency and bureau

## 5. 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:)

Patrick Andrews Signature of the Keeper 1/10/90 Date of Action

for Signature of the Keeper \_\_\_\_\_ Date of Action \_\_\_\_\_

**6. Function or Use**

Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions) Government/courthouse  
Current Functions (enter categories from instructions) Government/courthouse

**7. Description**

Architectural Classification (enter categories from instructions) Classical Revival  
Materials (enter categories from instructions)  
foundation stone  
walls stone  
roof asphalt  
other stone

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

[X] See continuation sheet, section 7, page 1.

**8. Statement of Significance**

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)  A  B  C  D  E  F  G

Areas of Significance (Enter categories from instructions) Architecture  
Politics/government  
Period of Significance 1905-39  
1905-07  
Significant Dates N/A

Cultural Affiliation N/A

Significant Person N/A  
Architect/Builder Berlinghof, George A.

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

[X] See continuation sheet, section 8, page 1.

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**9. Major Bibliographical References**

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[X] See continuation sheet, section 9, page 1.

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 of additional data:
- State historic preservation office
- Other state agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other
- Specify repository: \_\_\_\_\_

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**10. Geographical Data**

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Acreage of property 1.2 acres

UTM References

A	<u>14</u>	<u>660180</u>	<u>45300510</u>	B	<u>    </u>	<u>    </u>	<u>    </u>
	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
C	<u>    </u>	<u>    </u>	<u>    </u>	D	<u>    </u>	<u>    </u>	<u>    </u>
	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing

[ ] See continuation sheet, section 10, page 1.

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Verbal Boundary Description

[X] See continuation sheet, section 10, page 1.

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Boundary Justification

[X] See continuation sheet, section 10, page 1.

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**11. Form Prepared By**

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name/title	Barbara Beving Long, consultant
organization	Four Mile Research Co. date August 17, 1989
street & number	3140 Easton Boulevard telephone (515) 266-4964
city or town	Des Moines state Iowa zip code 50317

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Built in 1905-07, the Seward County Courthouse is an excellent, largely unaltered example of the Property Type, County Capitol. It is among the last of 18 extant examples built in Nebraska, five of which are individually listed on the National Register. Identifying features include: corner towers and central dome, four entrances (originally), permanent costly materials, Classical Revival stylistic influence, and impression of a government building of permanence and solidity. The courthouse is a good example of the work of an important Nebraska architect, George A. Berlinghof; his use of the Classical Revival shows his ability to adapt to changing stylistic preferences. The courthouse is part of the Seward County Courthouse Square Historic District.

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The Seward County Courthouse has three stories, although the smooth, rusticated stone of the ground level gives the appearance of a raised basement. Access onto this ground floor is via three steps down on the north facade, although the entries are at grade for the other facades.

Pavilions with squared tops and pediments are centered on all four sides of the 80x100' rectangular building. With its single round-arched entry, the north facade was intended to be the primary entrance, in essence, first among equals. The other entrances have three small archways that form an arcade. An important design characteristic are the four corner towers with a stone paneled parapet and low bulbous domes and the lofty ribbed center dome (with cupola) that rises from a tall drum. The drum is decorated with pediments, smooth and squared engaged columns, and chiming clocks.

The flat-roofed building is faced with smooth limestone, a hallmark of the Classical Revival style. Other Classical Revival elements include: symmetrical arrangement, monumental proportions (especially the large smooth engaged columns), flat moulded lintels, pedimented pavilions, smooth surface, and unadorned parapet. Other notable features are the attractive round-arched entry with acanthus keystone on the north facade, Corinthian capitals on smooth engaged columns (at pavilions) or squared pilasters (at corners), ground floor arcades, top and side lights around the north door, and the mighty central dome resting on its octagonal drum. Rectangular windows have transoms, simple surrounds, and those that are grouped share a moulded sill. First floor corner windows are more elaborate, with pediments and consoles.

A drawing of the proposed courthouse when it was first built shows a slightly more exuberant design of Beaux-Arts inspiration. However, the

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finished product was more simplified. For example, the parapet is solid that is shown on the drawing as a balustrade. The courthouse is a transitional example that draws from Beaux-Arts and Classical Revival stylistic elements, but the latter seems to be the dominant influence.

The building's floorplan is compact, and county offices are located off a small interior hallway on the first floor. The sole staircase is located at the center of the north facade across from the entry. An unusual feature was that one south door was intended to give direct access to ground level public toilets. Indeed, provision of such facilities for farm families visiting the county seat was a selling point in the courthouse bond issue campaign. The county provided a matron for the ladies' restroom. A large assembly room was also on the ground floor.

Alterations to the exterior are minimal, expected, and handled sensitively: spiral metal fire stairs on the east facade, west entrance closed off, replacement windows. The interior has been considerably changed, with dropped ceilings, fluorescent lights, wood paneling, and some new wall partitions. The district courtroom has now been divided into two courtrooms. Also during the early 1970s renovation, an elevator to provide handicapped access was placed in hall space directly south of the stairwell. In the mid-1950s the ladies lounge was converted to a county judge's chambers because he could not climb stairs. However, a public restroom with a separate entrance has again been placed on the ground floor.

Original features remain in hallways, including plaster capitals and moulding, terrazzo flooring, marble stairs, baseboards, and counters in offices, and metal balusters and newels topped with urns. An attractive metal plaque in the first floor hallway recognizes the generous donation Lewis and Mary Moffitt made to the county for the courthouse.

The courthouse is centered on a courthouse square which has a host of mature trees (making photographing difficult). Commercial buildings and attractive brick streets surround it on all sides. Cement walks lead to all four entrances and also around the building. A bandstand apparently of recent construction, benches, simple flagpole, four very low plaques dedicated to veterans of World Wars I and II, and the Korean and Viet Nam conflicts, and a fine G.A.R. statue erected June 25, 1924 in memory of Civil War veterans are all located on the principal (north) facade. For this nomination, small objects were not counted, the newer bandstand is a noncontributing building, and the G.A.R. statue a contributing object.

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The Seward County Courthouse is architecturally significant (Criterion C) and also historically significant (Criterion A) for its association with politics and local government. The property derives its historic significance as the focal point for the administration of local government and institutions in Seward County. It is an exceptional example of public architecture and contains good examples of design features and facilities distinctive to its design and use as a courthouse. In addition, the courthouse is a fine example of the work of an important Nebraska architect, George A. Berlinghof. With its standing as a late and excellent example of the County Capitol in Nebraska and as one of eight courthouse designs by Berlinghof (or his firm), the Seward County Courthouse is of Statewide Significance.

As an important example of the County Capitol, the courthouse contains design features and facilities distinctive to its design and use (such as fireproof vaults), has corner towers and a dome, costly materials, and distinctive ornamentation. Elements of the design combine effectively to convey an impression of a government building of permanence and solidity, another feature of the County Capitol. The Period of Significance is 1905, when construction began, to 1939, when the "fifty year rule" takes effect. The Seward County Courthouse is being nominated as an example of the Property Type, County Courthouses of Nebraska (County Capitol) of the Context, County Government in Nebraska, 1854-1941, from the Multiple Property Submission, County Courthouses of Nebraska.

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Seward County is the first county west of Lincoln, Nebraska. With its proximity to the state capital, the county was organized rather early in the state's settlement history, in 1865. Settlers in the south part of the county along an established road wanted the county seat designation, but those in the north were able to delay consideration for several years.

Repeated elections in which none of the competing communities received a sufficient number of votes as well as court cases further delayed settlement of the county seat question. Three places, Seward, Milford, and Camden, competed for the county seat designation, with Milford the early winner. Seward backers remained hopeful and active, and the issue was not finally settled until October 1871. County voters selected Seward, which was platted in 1868, at that time.

According to a 1916 county history

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A court house was considered not only a necessity, but a help to seal the location of the county capital, therefore funds were procured by private donations to erect a court house in accordance with the needs of the county.

The first courthouse, which did not occupy the present courthouse square, was a frame building that soon proved inadequate for county needs. The county rented rooms for more fireproof storage space than the courthouse could provide between 1879 and 1907 when the present building was completed.

It was apparent that the county needed a more suitable house of government. Among those who recognized this need was Lewis Moffitt, a farmer and the founder of Seward. In 1900 Moffitt died and under the terms of his will left a farm to the county, with certain restrictions. Upon the death of his wife Mary the land was to be sold and the money used towards building a courthouse and jail. The courthouse, which had to be on the public square, had to cost at least \$80,000, and with the jail to cost not more than \$100,000, according to the terms of the will. The Moffitt gift came to approximately \$30,000.

One year after Moffitt's death, in 1901, Seward County voters rejected a \$100,000 bond issue for the courthouse and jail. The county had to wait to take advantage of Moffitt's generosity. After receiving a petition calling for a bond issue election, the county called for such an election to be held in November 1904. County officials and Seward boosters then undertook a concerted campaign to persuade voters of the need for a bond issue in order to erect a suitable courthouse. Lively debates ensued over financing methods and placing the courthouse on the town square. Newspaper articles pointed out that "economy and safety and public convenience all demand" a fireproof courthouse with county offices all in one place. Other articles noted that the county could well afford the extra tax to pay for the bonds. To secure the farm vote, boosters boasted that the courthouse would have restrooms for visiting farmers and their families to use.

The bond issue election passed on November 10, 1904. The county board concentrated on courthouse construction and delayed work on a separate jail. Although the Moffitt estate and the bond issue included a jail, it was not built until 1915, reportedly because the bonds were mislaid for a time. The jail was not built on the courthouse square.

Six architects competed for the courthouse commission. On June 4, 1905, the board selected George Berlinghof, apparently because they like his design of the Thayer County Courthouse. Built in 1901, this much

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modified building is a rock-faced Richardsonian Romanesque design, in contrast with the Classical Revival Seward County Courthouse.

The contractors selected in April 1905, with a bid of \$80,350, were Marxen and Rokahr of Avoca, Iowa. The firm had just completed a courthouse in Denison, Iowa. Separate contracts were let to L.W. Pomerene and Company of Lincoln for heating and plumbing (\$6,100) and to John Martz of Seward for electrical work (\$775). These contracts may be the first instance of separate contracts let for Nebraska courthouses, reflecting changes in courthouse construction techniques.

Groundbreaking ceremonies were held on June 4, 1905, and the local newspaper noted that "work has at last commenced on Seward County's new courthouse." The construction project attracted workers from Iowa and other states to the east. Four are known to have remained in Seward. The cornerstone was laid, with suitable fanfare, on September 20, 1905.

Delays from suppliers and problems with the general contractor slowed progress at times. For example, the contractor refused to pay the builder of the dome, Des Moines Bridge and Iron Works, saying what arrived was not what was ordered. By September 1906 it was clear the building would not be finished at the agreed time, October 1906. After enduring further delays and investigating their cause, the board fired Marxen and Rokahr. It was not until June 1907 that county officials moved into the new courthouse. Lawsuits dragged on, and the county was forced to pay \$18,000 in damages and settle out of court with another \$3,984.

In addition to its standing as the seat of county government, the Seward County Courthouse is of architectural interest. The design effectively combines the massing of the County Capitol Property Type with elements of the Classical Revival style and appears to be the earliest example of this combination in the state.

The earliest extant County Capitol courthouse in Nebraska was built in 1888-89 in Johnson County. Construction began on the Seward County example 17 years later, reflecting the popularity of the property type. When compared with earlier Berlinghof courthouses (see the 1899-1900 Richardsonian Romanesque Nemaha County Courthouse NR nomination, for example), the Seward County Courthouse shows the evolution of his designs.



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George A. Berlinghof was a German immigrant who initially settled in Beatrice, Nebraska. In 1905 he moved to Lincoln where his expertise and connections resulted in his selection as architect for the State of Nebraska in 1907. Berlinghof is known to have designed courthouses in four other states as well as for seven other Nebraska counties.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>In chronological order the counties are Nemaha, Thayer, Seward, Kearney, Howard, Greeley, Lincoln, and Franklin. The Thayer County Courthouse has been altered and does not appear to be eligible for the National Register, unlike the others.

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Long, Barbara Beving. "County Courthouses of Nebraska." Multiple Property Submission. 1989.  
Nebraska State Historical Society. Photo Collection. #M281-1059, M281-96.  
Seward County League of Women Voters. "A History of the Seward County Courthouse." 1980. An extremely thorough account.  
Waterman, John H. General History of Seward County, Nebraska. Beaver Crossing: n.p., 1916.  
Seward County. Supervisors' Records. 1905.  
Jane Graff. On a Bend of the River. Henderson: Seward Centennial Committee, 1967. Reprint?  
Seward, Nebraska. Sanborn Fire Insurance Map. 1910.

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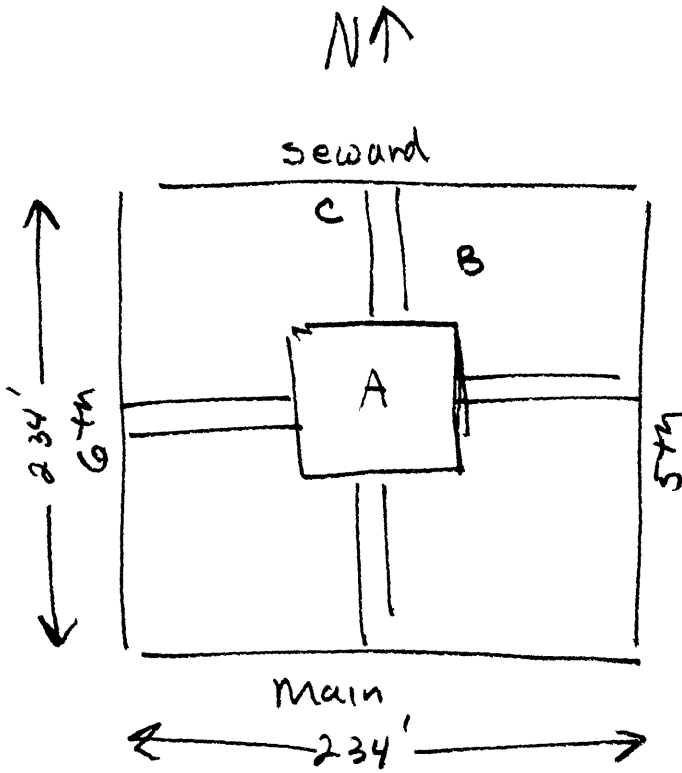
Verbal Boundary Description

The nominated property, Seward County Courthouse, occupies the Public Square of the Original Town of Seward and is roughly 234x234' in size.

Boundary Justification

The boundary includes the entire city block that has historically been associated with the property.

SEWARD COUNTY  
COURTHOUSE (SW09-93)  
Seward, NE



Contributing

- A - courthouse - bldg
- B - GAR statue - obj.

Noncontributing

- c - gazebo - bldg