

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

FOR FEDERAL PROPERTIES

FOR NPS USE ONLY
RECEIVED **JAN 13 1983**
DATE ENTERED

SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN *HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS*
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS

RECEIVED
APR 12 1982
OHP

1 NAME

HISTORIC
United States Post Office

AND/OR COMMON

Federal Building; U.S. Post Office - El Viejo Station

2 LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER

Twelfth and I Streets

__NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CITY, TOWN

Modesto

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

__ VICINITY OF

na 15th

STATE

California

CODE

06

COUNTY

Stanislaus

CODE

099

3 CLASSIFICATION

CATEGORY

- DISTRICT
- BUILDING(S)
- STRUCTURE
- SITE
- OBJECT

OWNERSHIP

- PUBLIC
- PRIVATE
- BOTH
- PUBLIC ACQUISITION**
- IN PROCESS
- BEING CONSIDERED
- NA

STATUS

- OCCUPIED
- UNOCCUPIED
- WORK IN PROGRESS
- ACCESSIBLE**
- YES: RESTRICTED
- YES: UNRESTRICTED
- NO

PRESENT USE

- AGRICULTURE
- MUSEUM
- COMMERCIAL
- PARK
- EDUCATIONAL
- PRIVATE RESIDENCE
- ENTERTAINMENT
- RELIGIOUS
- GOVERNMENT
- SCIENTIFIC
- INDUSTRIAL
- TRANSPORTATION
- MILITARY
- OTHER:

4 AGENCY

REGIONAL HEADQUARTERS: *(If applicable)*

General Services Administration Region IX

STREET & NUMBER

525 Market Street

CITY, TOWN

San Francisco

__ VICINITY OF

STATE

California 94105

5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE,
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

Stanislaus County Courthouse

STREET & NUMBER

802 Eleventh Street

CITY, TOWN

Modesto

STATE

California 95354

6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE

none

DATE

__FEDERAL __STATE __COUNTY __LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR
SURVEY RECORDS

CITY, TOWN

STATE

7 DESCRIPTION

CONDITION		CHECK ONE	CHECK ONE
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> EXCELLENT	<input type="checkbox"/> DETERIORATED	<input type="checkbox"/> UNALTERED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ORIGINAL SITE
<input type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> RUINS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ALTERED	<input type="checkbox"/> MOVED DATE _____
<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> UNEXPOSED		

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The Federal Building is situated in the mildly urban setting of the moderately sized agricultural community of Modesto. The building is located on a corner site - the west corner of Twelfth and I streets - two blocks from the central business district. "Downtown" Modesto consists largely of low-rise commercial buildings of varying ages, representing most of the architectural styles developed since the 1880s; interspersed among the buildings is a typical array of parking lots, service stations, institutional buildings and other architectural anomalies. Directly across I Street from the Federal Building is the Stanislaus County Courthouse complex, and one block west of that, facing H Street, is the Modesto City Hall. Sharing the block with the Federal Building is a nondescript group of one- and two-story late nineteenth/ early twentieth century commercial blocks; directly behind it, across the public alley, is the contemporary two-story BankCal Building.

The Federal Building is oriented with the front facade facing southeast toward Twelfth Street, the busier of the two thoroughfares. It is set back from both Twelfth and I streets in its own lawn, a siting device which distinguishes the building from its commercial neighbors. The lawn and original foundation shrubbery at the front have largely been replaced by contemporary planters and hand-capped ramps with their attendant retaining walls. A small side yard along I Street still exists between the building and the sidewalk, although the original shrubbery is now gone, and trees have recently been planted in the sidewalks along both streets. The rear of the site is taken up by a large, paved parking/loading area behind the building; the southwest facade has been hidden almost entirely by a row of pine trees planted along that side as part of a 1967 renovation and beautification project. The main level of the Federal Building is raised above that of the sidewalk, and the building is approached via a wide granite stair ascending directly from the Twelfth Street sidewalk. Flanking the stair on either side are two original pieces of site furniture - decorative cast iron lampposts which hold large globes. The requisite flagpole is situated in the east corner of the lot between the building and the sidewalk.

The building exterior appears today virtually unaltered from its original state. The Federal Building is a 107' square with one story above grade and a full, raised basement. The simple square form is broken only by small setbacks on the front and side facades and a projection with adjacent setbacks at the rear. Classified as a fireproof structure, it is supported by a structural steel frame which holds pan type concrete floor and roof slabs. The roof is basically flat, covered with composition roofing, with a partial sloping outer edge on all sides which gives the impression of a hipped roof. Basically a brick box, it is the classical detailing which gives the building its refinement and stylistic distinction - and typifies it as one of many similar buildings designed by the

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

FOR NPS USE ONLY

RECEIVED

DATE ENTERED

CONTINUATION SHEET Federal Building ITEM NUMBER 7 PAGE 2

Supervising Architect's office (see Addendum, Item 8). With typical neoclassical symmetry and proportion, round arch arcades compose the central bays of the front and side facades; these are enframed on both sides by slightly projecting, matched brick end bays within which single classical windows are centered. This configuration - central prominent arcade anchored on both sides by solid corner elements - is an arrangement traceable to the Italian Renaissance designs of Palladio and others and was a favorite among government and private architects for public and large commercial buildings of the period. The neoclassical arrangement took on several appearances as architects varied the scale, proportion and detailing, but at its core it represented the type of classicism favored by the Treasury Department as appropriate for federal architecture. The Federal Building also displays the classical vertical hierarchy of base, body and cap, the base formed by the granite-faced raised foundation, the body by the brick walls and terra cotta arcades and the cap by the terra cotta entablature and deceptive tiled roof. The rear face, never intended for public inspection, is also symmetrically laid out, containing the typical classical windows in the corner bays, but dominated visually by the central loading dock and cantilevered canopy.

The arcades are mainline, albeit eclectic, classicism. Their stepped columns rest on compound moulded bases with flat plinths and are capped by flat Corinthian capitals. Above these spring the stepped and moulded, counterthrusting round arches, each peaked by an embellished keystone. These terra cotta assemblages form the focal points for the building, displaying a sense of refined strength. The center three arches of the front facade are open, forming an entrance into a shallow loggia through which the lobby is entered. This entry is flanked on either side by two archways infilled by Georgian windows (somewhat obscured by heavy steel grilles). All of the arches on the sides contain similar windows. The end bays are faced with brick and edged by tooled sandstone quoins which add emphasis and a sense of mass to the corners. Centered in each bay is a classically framed window, which is capped by a segmental pediment and enframed by quoins and a decorative lugsill. Beneath the pediment and sill are rolls and triglyphs, which under the sill rest just above the moulded watertable for the granite foundation. The entablature extends along the perimeter of the roof on all sides, adding horizontal emphasis to the facades; it too is embellished with eclectically derived classical ornamentation.

The loggia centered on the front facade is the public entrance to the building. It is formed by recessing the entry doors several feet behind the front arcade; these doors - incongruously designed with their gilded gold appliques - enter directly into the main lobby. The lobby features arcading similar to that on the

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

FOR NPS USE ONLY

RECEIVED

DATE ENTERED

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

CONTINUATION SHEET Federal Building ITEM NUMBER 7 PAGE 3

exterior, although the interior column shafts are made of travertine rather than terra cotta. Within the round arches and in the end wall is mounted a series of tempera murals created by Ray Boynton in 1936 (see Addendum, Item 8). The lobby configuration underwent its only major alteration during the 1967 remodeling of the building; at that time it was subdivided into a main and a secondary lobby, which is adjoined by a smaller elevator/stair lobby. Behind the lobbies is the main workroom, also reconfigured somewhat during the remodeling. Offices for the Postmaster, Assistant Postmaster and Postal Inspector line the front wall of the building, accessed from the lobbies. The basement is arranged as a series of spaces facing onto a single el-shaped hallway. The original finishes were described in September 1933 by the Modesto Tribune in an article announcing the Federal Building's open house:

The walls of the main entrance and lobby as well as the postmaster's rooms, are lined with travertine, a type of decomposed marble, giving a rough appearance to the walls. The flooring of the entrance lobby and loggia is made up of quarry tile bordered with trazza (terrazzo). Trazza is a substance made up of a collection of different colored bits of hard marble mixed with cement.

All wood floors are of oak and hard maple and laid in square blocks in heavy asphalt mastic and have been polished to a high finish.

The large, well ventilated basement houses the offices of the agricultural extension bureau, which includes a public lecture room, the internal revenue department, and the civil service offices.

The rest rooms for the employees and the public are lined with structural glass. There is also recreation quarters for the employees with shower room.

The postmaster's offices are walled with birch maple and have beamed ceilings. The special vaults are equipped with air vents as precautions against tear bombs placed within them. Similar vaults are built in the postal money order office.

Counters throughout the main lobby are to be composed of rust resisting metal which as yet has not arrived. Glass incased bulletin services are imbedded in the walls of the lobby and loggia.

A lookout gallery for postal inspection extends from one end of the building to the other. Oblong glassed openings near the ceiling are such that the inspector may observe the working of every employe (sic) without being himself observed. He enters and leaves the gallery from his own office and

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

FOR NPS USE ONLY

RECEIVED

DATE ENTERED

CONTINUATION SHEET Federal Building ITEM NUMBER 7 PAGE 4

his presence in the building is never known.

Durable and well-maintained, these finishes are still in place today. The public lobby features a quarry tile floor with terrazzo surrounds and inserts, travertine walls and columns, plaster walls between the arches (with the murals within them) and a wood beamed ceiling with stencil painted designs. The spaces between the beams have more recently been infilled with a suspended ceiling system. The main postal workroom features the original wood block floors and plaster ceilings and walls; the original inspector's gallery is still in place, although the viewing windows have been removed from the employees' restrooms. The private offices are as original. The basement has undergone substantial remodeling and today displays few original finishes.

Summary

The Federal Building is sited facing southeast on a corner lot two blocks from the central business district of Modesto. It is massed as a 107' square with one story above grade and a full raised basement; the simple neoclassical square form is broken only by small setbacks on the front and side facades. Covered by a flat roof with mission tiled hipped outer edges, the building is basically a brick box which depends upon classical detailing for its refinement and stylistic distinction. With typical neoclassical symmetry and proportion, round arch arcades compose the central bays of the front and side facades. These are enframed on both sides by slightly projecting, matched brick end bays within which single classical windows are centered. The building also displays the classical vertical hierarchy of base, body and cap, the base formed by the granite-faced raised foundation, the body by the brick walls and terra cotta arcades and the cap by the terra cotta entablature and tiled roof. The interior has undergone some alterations, but these have been undertaken with some degree of sensitivity and the public spaces retain their integrity; the exterior is in virtually original condition, due largely to an excellent maintenance program. Although the Federal Building does not present a radical stylistic departure from the surrounding architecture, it displays a refinement of design and commitment to classical principles unmatched in Modesto. For this reason, and given the building's heavy business and social use, the Federal Building stands out as a local landmark - a visual anchor for the neighborhood and a prominent architectural feature for the city.

8 SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD	AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW			
<input type="checkbox"/> PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNITY PLANNING	<input type="checkbox"/> LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> RELIGION
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-HISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> CONSERVATION	<input type="checkbox"/> LAW	<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENCE
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> ECONOMICS	<input type="checkbox"/> LITERATURE	<input type="checkbox"/> SCULPTURE
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATION	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input type="checkbox"/> SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ART	<input type="checkbox"/> ENGINEERING	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSIC	<input type="checkbox"/> THEATER
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCE	<input type="checkbox"/> EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> PHILOSOPHY	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNICATIONS	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRY	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY)
		<input type="checkbox"/> INVENTION		

SPECIFIC DATES	Designed: 1931 Built: 1932-33	BUILDER/ARCHITECT	Acting Supervising Architect James A. Wetmore
----------------	----------------------------------	-------------------	--

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The significance of the Federal Building in Modesto rests upon the building's intrinsic and representational values on a local level to the city. These values lie in three areas: architecture, art and politics/government. Architecturally the Federal Building is a locally prominent and well-preserved example of its genre - a small public building sensitively designed in a classical idiom by the Supervising Architect's office of the Treasury Department. Similarly the original tempera murals in the lobby are locally important examples - the only ones in Modesto - of the type of federally sponsored decorative artwork produced during the Depression. As art, the murals are less than stellar; as artifacts reflecting the social climate in which they were produced, however, they are important on a local scale and, if viewed comprehensively, on a national level as part of the widespread social realist art movement of the thirties and forties. Finally, the Federal Building represents Modesto's part of an extensive federal building program initiated in the late 1920s by the Hoover administration - the forerunner to Roosevelt's Public Works Administration. As the first federal building erected in the city, it was a source of pride for Modestans and a locally prominent symbol of the federal government.

Addendum

Although the Modesto Federal Building completed in 1933 was the first civil federal structure erected in Modesto by the Treasury Department, it was not the first structure put up specifically to house the postal facility. The 1933 building was preceded a decade by another. The proceedings for a new post office in Modesto had actually begun in March 1913 with the authorization and advertisement for a federal building site. The site at the corner of Twelfth and I streets was purchased for \$17,000 in December 1916, and three years later a \$65,000 appropriation for construction of a building was included in the Public Building Bill (H.R.333). The Modesto Federal Building was to have been one of hundreds of structures built across the country in a fifteen-year Congressional construction binge; however, increasingly vociferous criticism of porkbarrel politics dampened the enthusiasm in Congress for new building projects, and by the mid-1910s the program was

9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

See Addendum, Item 9

10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY .64
 UTM REFERENCES

A	1 0	6 7 6 7 6 0	4 1 6 7 6 7 0	B			
	ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING		ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING
C				D			

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

Legal description: Lots 9-16, Block 84, Original City of Modesto
 Property is located on west corner of Twelfth and I Streets, with 200' frontage on Twelfth Street and 140' frontage on I Street.

LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES

STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE
STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE

11 FORM PREPARED BY

NAME / TITLE Clayton B. Fraser, Principal	
ORGANIZATION Fraserdesign	DATE 7 March 1982
STREET & NUMBER 1269 Cleveland Avenue Suite Two	TELEPHONE 303-669-7969
CITY OR TOWN Loveland	STATE Colorado 80537

12 CERTIFICATION OF NOMINATION

STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER RECOMMENDATION

YES NO NONE *Kumell*
 4/20/82

STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER SIGNATURE

In compliance with Executive Order 11593, I hereby nominate this property to the National Register, certifying that the State Historic Preservation Officer has been allowed 90 days in which to present the nomination to the State Review Board and to evaluate its significance. The evaluated level of significance is National State Local.

FEDERAL REPRESENTATIVE SIGNATURE *W. ROTH* J. WALTER ROTH
 TITLE *DIRECTOR, HISTORIC PRESERVATION* DATE *12 JAN 83*
GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION

FOR NPS USE ONLY

I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PROPERTY IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER

DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF ARCHEOLOGY AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION
 DATE *2/10/83*

ATTEST: *Shelvia Byers* DATE *2/10/83*
 KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

Entered in the National Register

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

FOR NPS USE ONLY

RECEIVED

DATE ENTERED

CONTINUATION SHEET Federal Building ITEM NUMBER 8

PAGE 2

halted. Between 1913 and 1926 no new spending for public structures was authorized. H.R. 333 was defeated and with it Modesto's Federal Building. Frustrated by this setback, a group of local businessmen formed the Modesto Postoffice Improvement Association and in 1922-23 erected a single-story building on the federal site, to be leased to the Treasury as the city's main post office.

It was not until years later, during the next massive federal building program, that the government would get around to erecting its own building. The new Federal Building at Modesto was in reality part of an enormous federal construction program undertaken by Congress and the Hoover administration in the late 1920s and early 1930s. During this period some 1300 new civil federal buildings were erected, nearly doubling the number under the aegis of the Treasury Department. The program was initiated in 1926 with a Congressional authorization of \$165 million over a period of eleven years. The authorization was increased by \$125 million in 1928 and, with the Depression worsening, by \$330 million in 1930 and 1931. The total appropriation, including revenues from the sale of so-called obsolete structures which added \$69 million, hovered at \$700 million. According to Lois Craig in The Federal Presence: "In terms of establishing the image of the United States government, this program was the most important undertaken since the first few decades under the Constitution."

The massive construction effort was designed to serve three functions. First, it represented fiscal pragmatism and was calculated to reduce the rising rental costs incurred by the growing number of federal agencies in leased space. The program also afforded Congress an opportunity to distribute political presents in the form of post offices and courthouses, a type of logrolling it historically has found hard to resist. Finally, under the deepening shadow of the Depression, the building project was in later years also a make-work project, intended to provide jobs for the local unemployed. A predecessor to the myriad New Deal programs (Roosevelt took office the same month that the cornerstone was laid for this building), Hoover's building program was later absorbed within the Public Works Administration.

The new building in Modesto authorized by Congress in July 1930 required more room than the existing site allowed. Negotiations with undertaker Carl W. Shannon for an adjacent fifty-foot-wide strip of land occupied the remainder of the year. With the sale of the land completed in the spring of 1931, the townspeople anxiously awaited word from the Treasury Department about the progress of the proposed structure. They were again disappointed as the Treasury's Supervising Architect's office delayed the building's design. Complained the Modesto

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

FOR NPS USE ONLY

RECEIVED

DATE ENTERED

CONTINUATION SHEET Federal Building ITEM NUMBER 8 PAGE 3

News-Herald on 18 April 1931:

Nothing but surprise and disappointment can be the feeling of Modestans today in learning that this city's new \$185,000 post office will not be built for months to come - if then. When public-spirited merchants were raising \$1000 to make the building possible, last October, and there was much pressure to get the site question settled, William A. Newman of San Francisco, supervising federal architect said:

If the site were acquired immediately, the plans would be started without delay, construction would start before next Spring and the building would be finished in a year.

Accordingly the site business was disposed of, presumably on a basis satisfactory to the government. But now that Spring is here, Newman sings a different tune, as thus:

When the titles in the attorney general's office are properly transferred the project will go on the list of cities in the supervising architect's office in Washington to wait its turn before plans are drawn

Comparing these two statements, one is moved to remark that they seem quite in line with our current federal "government by hot air." And that one trusts the unannounced and unexpected delays will not open up a new controversy over the site. That would in all likelihood only make Modesto suffer further disappointment.

The Modesto City Council unanimously adopted a resolution in August urging the "desirability and necessity of commencing such construction without further delay" and sent copies to President Hoover, the Postmaster General and, among others, Congressman Henry E. Barbour, who secured the new building for the city the year before. Barbour pressed Treasury Secretary Lowman, and the plans were completed later the same year. The building was designed by the Supervising Architect's office in Washington, a part of the Treasury Department. The SA's office had been receiving increasing pressure from private architects; the renewed federal activity in this latest building program had rekindled long dormant animosities between the SA's office and the architects, represented by the American Institute of Architects. The AIA, protective of a membership beleaguered by the Depression, objected vehemently to in-house design of federal buildings by the SA's office, which had increased its staff from 432 in 1929 to 750 in 1932. A 1931 Resolution by the AIA Board of Directors proclaimed:

We believe that the country is entitled to the services of the best architectural talent available, and that the concentration of so large a

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

FOR NPS USE ONLY

RECEIVED

DATE ENTERED

CONTINUATION SHEET Federal Building ITEM NUMBER 8 PAGE 4

volume of work as the present appropriations provide, into the hands of a single Government bureau, must inevitably tend to produce stereotyped, mediocre and uninspiring results.

Architects railed against the SA repeatedly in the trade periodicals; American Architect was particularly fervent in its criticism, regularly publishing articles like "Government Architects Cannot Create Beauty" and "The Time Has Come for Government to Get Out of the Architecture Business." A counterattack was printed in the April 1931 Federal Architect, a magazine sympathetic to the SA:

The ethics of the profession has certainly taken a jolt when the architects of the country on letterheads of their A.I.A. Chapters blacken without investigation the work of other architects' offices with the naive and frank admission that it is for the purpose of getting architectural commissions for themselves.

The Federal Architectural offices are weaned and reared on criticism. If they use material A, delegations appear to lambaste them for not using material B. Or vice versa. If they face the building north, a newspaper crusade develops because it was not faced south. The bitter attacks of private architects are, therefore, merely the regular order. . . . But one could have wished that architects would have stood by architects.

Although the Public Buildings Acts of 1926 and 1930 granted the Treasury Department the option to commission private architects for federal projects for the first time since the repeal of the Tarnsey Act in 1911, the Hoover administration used their services sparingly, and the fusillades continued throughout the early 1930s.

There were stylistic differences as well. At one extreme was the SA's office, which continued to advocate classicism as the appropriate symbolic expression for public buildings. The SA executed hundreds of buildings of varying scales with classical facades and detailing during the twenties and thirties. James A. Wetmore was the Acting Supervising Architect from 1915 to 1933. A graduate of the Georgetown University Law School, Wetmore was not himself an architect, the reason for the "Acting" before his title; stylistic direction for the office was given by the Superintendent of the Architectural Division Louis A. Simon, a stylistic traditionalist who later succeeded Wetmore as Supervising Architect - the Treasury's last. At the other end of the spectrum were a number of architects in the avant garde of the private sector. Embracing the tenets of the emerging Art Deco and Moderne styles (and a decade later the International style), these architects designed public buildings relatively unembellished by ornamentation and austere when compared with their classical predecessors. Between the two

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

FOR NPS USE ONLY

RECEIVED

DATE ENTERED

CONTINUATION SHEET Federal Building ITEM NUMBER 8 PAGE 5

extremes, architects designed with a wide range of stylistic expression, combining new forms with borrowed revivalist or vernacular forms or motifs or somehow compromising between the classical and modern trends to create what is today termed "starved classicism."

The Modesto Federal Building, one of a few in the region designed by the SA's office, exhibits the synthesis of classical and vernacular elements which distinguishes many of the buildings designed by the staff architects in the 1930s. Whether the 1922-23 building presaged the later structure or influenced its design is not known, but the 1933 Federal Building resembles its predecessor in its detailing. The interchangeability of styles from one region of the country to another is evidenced by the further similarity of this building with other designed at the time, among them the Post Offices at Erie, Pennsylvania and Crockett, Texas.

Bids for construction were advertised in September 1932, and the contract was awarded on 9 November to Murch Brothers Construction Company of St. Louis. Murch, the lowest bidder in a field of nineteen, was a large national firm which had built Post Offices in Madison, Wisconsin, New London, Connecticut, Asheville, North Carolina and Casper, Wyoming, among others. Additionally, the firm held at that time construction contracts for the Post Offices in Waterbury, Connecticut, Seattle, Washington, Portland, Oregon and nearby Stockton, California. Notice to Proceed was issued by the Treasury on 21 November, and following the demolition of the existing building, construction was soon commenced. The cornerstone was laid in March 1933 amidst a parade and a flurry of speech-making by locally prominent personages. Reported the Modesto News-Herald:

Approximately 400 people gathered at the site of Modesto's new \$109,000 postoffice building at Twelfth and I streets Sunday afternoon to view a cornerstone laying ceremony held under the auspices of Wildey Lodge No. 149, I.O.O.F. . . . Officers of the Grand Lodge of Odd Fellows were in charge of the actual laying of the cornerstone. They are Fred Belkin, grand master, Carl Shannon, deputy grand master, W. Johnson, grand chaplain, and George Hudson, grand secretary. Immediately following the laying of the cornerstone, the Modesto Post No. 74, American Legion, conducted a flag raising ceremony.

Entombed within the stone were a bible, a history of Modesto, copies of the U.S. Constitution and the Declaration of Independence and some coins and rosters of various fraternal and social groups, among other things.

Work on the building continued through the summer, and on 21 July the News-Herald observed:

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

FOR NPS USE ONLY

RECEIVED

DATE ENTERED

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

CONTINUATION SHEET Federal Building ITEM NUMBER 8 PAGE 6

Work on the Modesto postoffice is far ahead of schedule, Walter Sanger, government engineer in charge of construction reported Thursday, whereas the original contract called for completion on December 16, the building will be ready for occupancy early in September. On July 1 the building was 74.5 per cent completed. . . . The only thing that may delay progress is the possible failure of mill work to arrive on schedule, Sanger said.

Plastering in the loggia as well as the main room and the basement has been completed and scaffolding removed. The laying of the travertine, a marble coating, has been begun in the postmaster's office. The pouring of fill floors in the basement, and on the main floor has been completed, and the wood block floor coverings will be installed next. The work on the roof has been practically completed.

The Federal Building was to have been opened on 11 September 1933, but a series of material delays, the most dramatic of which reportedly involved a fiery wreck of a supplier's truck, pushed the opening date back a month. On 2 October the building was opened to the public. It stood two years unaltered, with the landscaping completed in 1935. In 1936 Ray Boynton was commissioned to create several tempera murals for the public lobby. The commission was one of some 1371 between 1934 and 1943 awarded by the Treasury Department's Section of Fine Arts as part of a New Deal relief program to aid struggling local artists and place original art into public buildings. Boynton, assisted by several other artists, produced nine murals illustrating pastoral scenes such as: "Sorting Beans," "Harvesting Grapes" and "Digging an Irrigation Ditch" - all somewhat romanticized depictions of American social culture favored at that time by the government.

The operational history of the Modesto Federal Building has consisted largely of the daily activities of the occupant agencies. The building originally had housed the city's main post office facility and offices for several other federal agencies, including the IRS, the Agricultural Extension Service and National Reemployment Service. Today the post office is a station, having been replaced as the main office in 1967 by a new facility. At that time the building was remodeled, and the IRS occupied the space created by cutting down the main work room. In 1980 the IRS moved from the building and the space was returned to the post office. Today the post office again occupies the entire main level, with the basement housing offices of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service examination room, the U.S. Probation Officer, the Fifteenth District Congressman and storage, custodial and mechanical functions.

The Federal Building is important to Modesto for both historical and architectural reasons, and although its is not yet fifty years old, its shortfall is so minor as

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

FOR NPS USE ONLY
RECEIVED
DATE ENTERED

CONTINUATION SHEET Federal Building ITEM NUMBER 8 PAGE 7

to be almost moot. A pivotal building for the central business district, the building is a local landmark for the city - the first federal building erected in Modesto and a well-executed and -preserved example of neoclassical architecture.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

FOR NPS USE ONLY

RECEIVED

DATE ENTERED

CONTINUATION SHEET Federal Building ITEM NUMBER 9 PAGE 1

Addendum: Major Bibliographic References

Books

- Armstrong, Ellis L. ed. History of Public Works in the United States: 1776-1976. Chicago: American Public Works Association, 1976.
- Craig, Lois, ed. and the staff of the Federal Architecture Project. The Federal Presence: Architecture, Politics, and Symbols in United States Government Building. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1978.
- Fletcher, Banister. A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967.
- Maino, Jeanette Gould. One Hundred Years. Modesto: Belt Printing & Lithograph Company, 1970.
- Page, Charles Hall & Associates, Inc. Splendid Survivors: San Francisco's Downtown Architectural Heritage. San Francisco: California Living Books, 1976.
- Tinkham, George H. History of Stanislaus County, California. Los Angeles: Historic Record Company, 1921.
- Whiffen, Marcus. American Architecture Since 1780: A Guide to the Styles. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1969.
- Who's Who in America Volume 1: 1897-1942. Chicago: A.N. Marquis Company, 1942.

Periodicals

- Heath, Ferry K. "The Federal Building Program," Architectural Forum, September 1931.
- Sawyer, Phillip. "The Design of Public Buildings," Architectural Forum, September 1931.

Newspapers

- "Agreement on Postoffice Site Happily Reached." (editorial) Modesto News-Herald, 23 October 1930.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

FOR NPS USE ONLY

RECEIVED

DATE ENTERED

CONTINUATION SHEET Federal Building ITEM NUMBER 9 PAGE 2

- "Appeal Sent to Hoover to Rush Postoffice Job." Modesto Morning Herald, 14 August 1931.
- "Construction of New Postoffice to be Delayed." Modesto News-Herald, 17 April 1931.
- "Construction of Postoffice Now in Final Stages." Modesto News-Herald, 21 July 1933.
- "Construction of Postoffice to Start This Year." Modesto News-Herald, 4 August 1931.
- "Cornerstone for Postoffice to be Laid March 12." Modesto News-Herald, 27 February 1933.
- "Cornerstone Laying of New P.O. Building." Modesto Tribune, 10 March 1933.
- "Cornerstone of New Postoffice Building is Laid." Modesto News-Herald, 13 March 1933.
- "Cornerstone of Postoffice to be Laid Sunday." Modesto News-Herald, 10 March 1933.
- "Job Office to Move into New Postoffice Here." Modesto Bee, 20 September 1933.
- "Landscaping is Nearly Finished at Postoffice." Modesto Bee, 10 January 1935.
- "Modesto P.O. Contracts Are Let." Modesto Morning Herald, 20 January 1923.
- "New Postoffice Building Placed in Service Here." Modesto Bee, 2 October 1933.
- "New Postoffice is to be Built." Modesto Morning Herald, 13 October 1922.
- "New Postoffice to Open on October 2." Modesto Bee, 21 September 1933.
- "New Postoffice Plans Started." Modesto Bee, 16 October 1931.
- "New Postoffice to be Built on Present Site." Modesto News-Herald, 22 October 1930.
- "New Postoffice to be Completed by September." Modesto News-Herald, 29 May 1933.
- "New Postoffice to Open Friday." Modesto Morning Herald, 21 June 1923.
- "New P.O. Will Open Soon." Modesto Morning Herald, 10 June 1923.
- "Open House at Postoffice to be Held Friday." Modesto Bee, 29 September 1933.
- "Open House at New Post Office Tonight." Modesto Tribune, 29 September 1933.
- "Postoffice Cornerstone in Place." Modesto News-Herald, 14 March 1933.
- "Postoffice is 'Peakeasy.'" Modesto News-Herald, 22 July 1933.
- "Postoffice Move Delayed." Modesto Tribune, 8 September 1933.
- "Postoffice Outlook Strangely Changed." Modesto News-Herald, 18 April 1931.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

FOR NPS USE ONLY

RECEIVED

DATE ENTERED

CONTINUATION SHEET Federal Building ITEM NUMBER 9 PAGE 3

- "Postoffice Site Deal Delayed by Lease Dispute." Modesto News-Herald, 14 November 1930.
- "Postoffice Site Problem Solved." Modesto News-Herald, 12 December 1930.
- "Postoffice Site Sale Agreement Placed in Mail." Modesto News-Herald, 23 October 1930.
- "Postoffice to Move into New Home September 11." Modesto Bee, 7 August 1933.
- "Shannon Signs New Postoffice Site Agreement." Modesto News-Herald, 27 November 1930.
- "Treasury Architect Approves Deal for Modesto P.O. Site." Modesto News-Herald, 5 December 1930.
- "Work Far Ahead of Schedule on New Postoffice." Modesto News-Herald, 25 June 1933.
- "Work Progressing on New P.O." Modesto Morning Herald, 10 June 1923.
- "Work to Start on P.O. Office Fete Planned Monday." Modesto Morning Herald, 28 January 1923.

Miscellaneous

- Hoover, Sherman, Station Manager. Oral Interview with Clayton Fraser, 23 July 1981.
- Taylor, Daniel, Modesto Postmaster. Oral Interview with Clayton Fraser, 23 July 1981.
- U.S. Department of Treasury, Public Buildings Service. "Fine Arts Inventory - Federal Building, Modesto California." by Ralf Parton, 1972. Provided by General Services Administration Region 9 Office, San Francisco California.
- U.S. Department of Treasury, Public Buildings Service. Site correspondence for U.S. Post Office, Modesto California. (General Correspondence, 1910-39; Entry 31; Box 1269). Provided by National Records Center, Suitland Maryland.
- Vertical Files. Stanislaus County Assessor, Stanislaus County Courthouse, Modesto California.