

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

For NPS use only

National Register of Historic Places  
Inventory—Nomination Form

received FEB 9 1987

date entered MAR 23 1987

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*  
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

1. Name

historic Davidson County Courthouse

and/or common Metropolitan Courthouse

2. Location

street & number Public Square N/A not for publication

city, town Nashville N/A vicinity of

state Tennessee code 047 county Davidson code 037

3. Classification

<b>Category</b>	<b>Ownership</b>	<b>Status</b>	<b>Present Use</b>	
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> public	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> museum
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input type="checkbox"/> commercial	<input type="checkbox"/> park
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> educational	<input type="checkbox"/> private residence
<input type="checkbox"/> site	<b>Public Acquisition</b>	<b>Accessible</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment	<input type="checkbox"/> religious
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> N/A in process	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> government	<input type="checkbox"/> scientific
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
		<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> other:

4. Owner of Property

name Richard Fulton, Metropolitan Mayor  
Metropolitan Government of Nashville and Davidson County

street & number 107 Metropolitan Courthouse

city, town Nashville N/A vicinity of state Tennessee 37201

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Davidson County Courthouse

street & number Public Square

city, town Nashville state Tennessee

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title NONE has this property been determined eligible?  yes  no

date N/A N/A federal state county local

depository for survey records N/A

city, town N/A state N/A

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## 7. Description

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**Condition**

excellent  
 good  
 fair

deteriorated  
 ruins  
 unexposed

**Check one**

unaltered  
 altered

**Check one**

original site  
 moved date \_\_\_\_\_

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**Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance**

The Davidson County Courthouse, situated in the Central Business District of Nashville on a bluff overlooking the Cumberland River, is one of only a handful of Art Deco buildings built in the county. The Courthouse is virtually completely original on the exterior and major interior spaces retain their historical integrity. The design, which combines Art Deco with certain elements of traditional governmental symbolism, is the work of Frederick Heirons of New York and Emmons Woolwine of Nashville. Beautifully built and lavishly detailed, the building employs sophisticated planning and was the first to be built in Davidson County with central air conditioning. The courthouse is rectangular in plan, 264 feet wide and 102 feet deep. It contains eight principal floors and a basement. There are also two mezzanines, one between the sixth and seventh floors and one between the seventh and eighth. There are fifteen bays across the front. Construction is steel frame set on concrete piers in solid rock and sheathed with pale beige Indiana limestone. Grey-green granite is used as decorative trim at the principal and rear entrances.

The decorative treatment of the rather austere exterior revolves around governmental symbolism. The principal decorative feature is a row of twelve colossal Doric Columns rising from the fourth floor through the seventh which link the otherwise quite modern design with traditional American governmental buildings, most obviously Tennessee's exquisite Greek Revival-style State Capitol (National Register 1970).

At the main entrance, three recessed two-story doorways at the center of the principal facade, are three parts of bronze doors which close flush with the outer wall of the building. On each door is a symbolic figure, representing, in order left to right, Courage, Loyalty, Law, Justice, Security, and Wisdom. During the day, when the building is open, the doors swing inward and stand against either side of each doorway recess, making the figures visible to people passing in or out of the building. Above each door is a window with a figure of a lawgiver sandblasted into the glass. These represent King John of England, Moses, and Justinian. There is a similar window above the rear entrance with the figure of blindfolded Justice holding scales. In the cornice of the main block, three carved stone figures are a repeating motif. The figures, a snake and the heads of bison and a lioness, represent wisdom, strength, and protection.

Additional decorative work is restrained and more typical of Art Deco designs. Stylized plant forms decorate the bronze spandrel panels between stories on the front and sides of the building. A chevron motif worked into the stone at the top of the penthouse substitutes for a cornice.

Each floor of the courthouse is arranged around a central hall running along the east-west axis of the building but not its entire length. At the center of the building's length, an elevator lobby opens to the north (rear) side off the central hall. Windows in the elevator lobby provide natural light to the hall. The main entrance lobby, a two-story room 30' x 40' in dimension, opens to the south face of the building on the first floor opposite the elevator lobby.

Decorative treatment of the interior is more ornate than the exterior. Red-brown Tennessee marble, highly polished, is used lavishly on the interior; cast bronze and etched glass are used for light fixtures, polished brass for elevator doors, bronze for stair rails. Decorative patterns are worked into the highly polished terrazzo floors. Plaster hallway ceilings are coffered. The main entrance lobby deserves a special mention. The symbolic

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themes of the exterior carry over into murals on the side walls of the room. The murals, painted by Dean Cornwell, center on four heroic figures representing Industry, Agriculture, Commerce, and Statesmanship (the last, an idealized figure of Andrew Jackson). Behind Industry and Agriculture is a map of Davidson County; behind Commerce and Statesmanship, a map of Nashville (as of 1937). At the center of the ceiling, which is painted with a sunburst effect, is a large bronze and glass chandelier. Its twelve large glass panels are etched with the twelve symbols of the zodiac. The terrazzo floor in the lobby is particularly ornate.

The building also contains a number of courtrooms. Some of these have been altered in varying degrees over the years, but several remain virtually intact. Two Criminal Court rooms are notable, featuring twenty-foot ceilings, walnut panelling, and elaborate etched glass chandeliers. Circuit and Chancery Courts were smaller in scale but more colorful. Two of these are intact, with walnut panelling, simpler light fixtures, and elaborate stenciling in multi-colored geometric designs on the coffered ceilings.

The Metro Council chamber originally resembled these courtrooms but was completely remodeled in a loose imitation-Georgian style several years ago. Most of the rest of the interior was and remains nondescript office space.

The courthouse sits in the Public Square, the site of Nashville courthouses since the 1780s, at a high point on the bluffs overlooking the Cumberland River. The building faces south-southeast. On the terrace in front of the principal facade are two fountains of grey-green granite, matching that used for trim on the building. These fountains were designed and executed as an integral part of the project.

Until the early 1970s, the courthouse was surrounded by solid blocks of nineteenth century commercial and warehouse buildings. These were demolished, and there are now vast parking lots to the south and east of the building.

# 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/
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700–1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input type="checkbox"/> humanitarian
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800–1899	<input type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> theater
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900–	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify)

**Specific dates** 1936–1937

**Builder/Architect** Frederick Heirons and

Emmons Woolwine/architects

**Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)**

The Davidson County Courthouse is nominated to the National Register under Criterion C for its architectural merit in Nashville, Davidson County, Tennessee. The courthouse is the fourth on the same site, a site set aside for this use in the original town plan. It has architectural significance as a fine example of the Art Deco style and is extremely important in the Nashville context as one of only six significant Art Deco buildings in town. The others are The James Robertson Hotel (National Register 1984), the Kress Building (National Register 1983), the United States Post Office (National Register 1984), the Sudekum Building (National Register 1979), and the Seventh Avenue Parking Garage.

The courthouse is the fourth to be built on the same site. This site was set aside in the original town plan of Nashville for a public square and public building. The present building replaced a pre-Civil War structure and a nearby city hall which local government had outgrown. Plans for the new building were begun in the late 1920s, delayed by the Depression, and then facilitated by the Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works. In 1934, a \$400,000 bond issue was approved for the Davidson County government to build the structure, with the city government of Nashville to lease space.

An architectural competition was held in 1935 to select the design. Frederick Heirons of New York and Emmons Woolwine of Nashville, working in association, won the competition. The cornerstone, containing a box filled with photographs, courthouse records, and current newspapers, was laid in August, 1936. The building was officially opened on December 8, 1937. Its construction had cost \$1,595,000, with funding shared by federal and local governments.

The building's use has remained constant as the seat of local government. In 1963, the city and county governments combined to form the Metropolitan Government of Nashville and Davidson County, but the two governments shared the building for twenty-five years before their official consolidation.

The architectural style of the courthouse is an interesting blend of Art Deco modernism and traditional elements designed to clearly signal the building's governmental purpose. The row of colossal Doric columns is the most obvious of these elements, tying the courthouse to the Greek Revival state capitol and Classical Revival-style public buildings all across the nation. Further, the frequent use of painting and sculpture symbolizing traditional virtues gives the building an old-fashioned emotional appeal, even though these artworks are executed in a modernistic style.

The traditional elements are carefully employed so that they are clearly present while the total visual effect of the 1930s modernity prevails. Beautifully detailed throughout, the courthouse is one of the most visually coherent and stylistically sophisticated buildings built in Nashville up to that time. It is one of only six Art Deco designs of significant size built in Nashville, and one of these has been seriously altered over the years.

# 9. Major Bibliographical References

The Nashville Tennessean, May 18, 1935; May 19, 1935.  
Creighton, Wilbur F., The Building of Nashville. Nashville: Wilbur F. Creighton, Jr., 1975.

# 10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of nominated property approximately 2 1/2 acres

Quadrangle name Nashville West, Tennessee 308NE

Quadrangle scale 1:24000

### UTM References

A 1 6 | 5 1 9 9 2 0 | 4 0 0 2 3 2 0  
Zone Easting Northing

B | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |  
Zone Easting Northing

C | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

D | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

E | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

F | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

G | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

H | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

Verbal boundary description and justification The nominated boundary, a rectangle 200' X 325' was selected to correspond to the boundary of the lot on which the courthouse stands as shown on map 93-2 (parcel 56).

### List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

state	N/A	code	N/A	county	N/A	code	N/A
state	N/A	code	N/A	county	N/A	code	N/A

# 11. Form Prepared By

name/title David Paine

organization Metropolitan Historical Commission date November 28, 1984

street & number Customs House, 701 Broadway telephone 615/259-5027

city or town Nashville state Tennessee 37203

# 12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:  
\_\_\_ national \_\_\_ state  local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer signature *Michael L. Hryca*

title Executive Director, Tennessee Historical Commission date 1/28/87

### For NPS use only

I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

*Amy Schlager*

date March 23, 1987

Keeper of the National Register

Attest:

date

Chief of Registration

**United States Department of the Interior  
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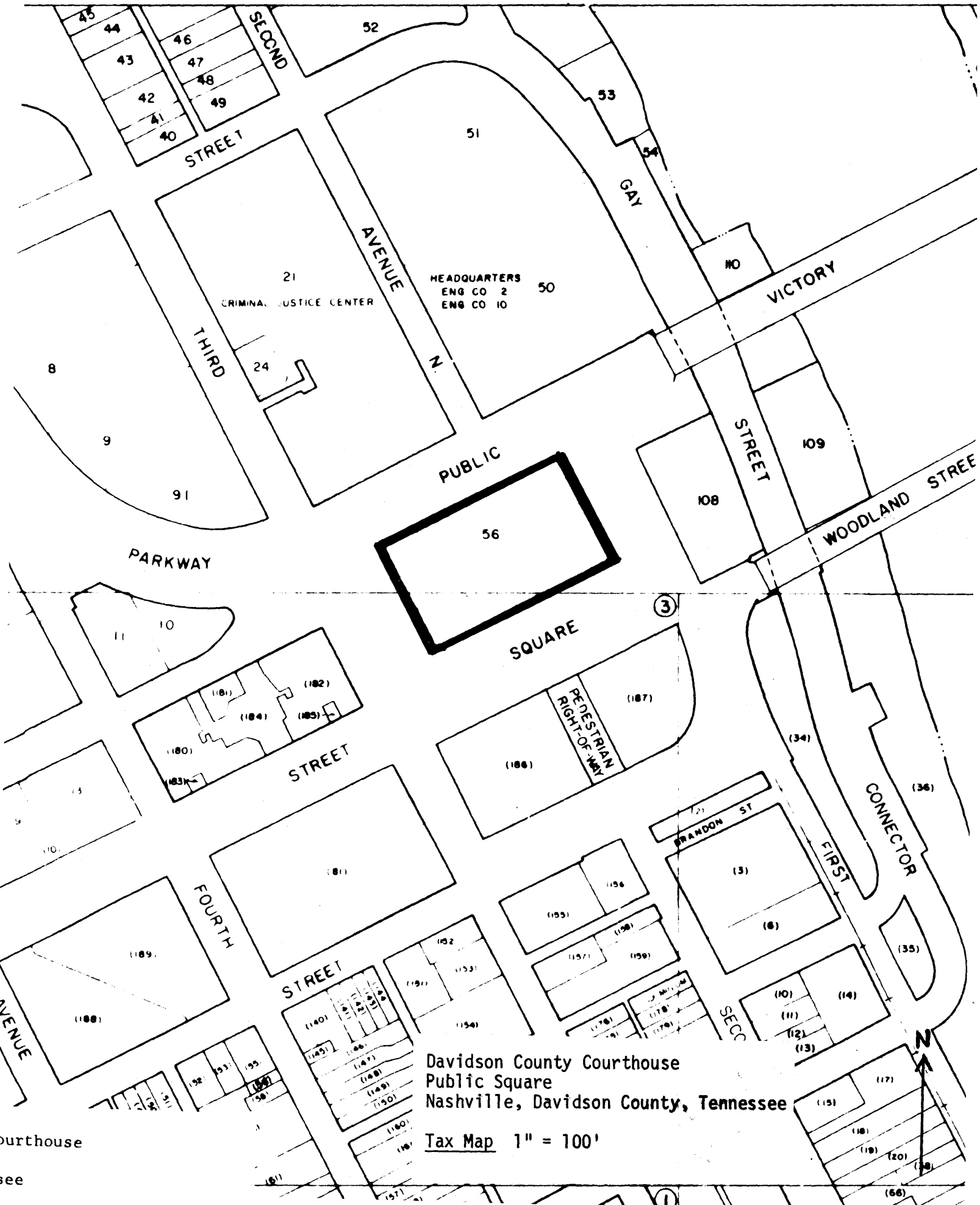
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The courthouse is relatively unaltered. With the exception of a handicapped access ramp to the right of the main entrance, the exterior is unchanged. The interior has been changed in places but the main lobby, the public hallways, and four courtrooms remain virtually intact. The Metro Council chamber is the only important interior space that no longer resembles its original configuration.

The courthouse is important to Nashville as a symbol of the continuity of 200 years of municipal government. Its site is a clear reminder of the origin of the city on the bluffs overlooking the Cumberland River. It is also important as one of Nashville's best and most intact examples of the short-lived Art Deco style. The courthouse is entering a critical period in its life, as Metropolitan government undertakes the task of interior cleaning and repair of damage caused by several years of deferred maintenance. Recognition by all parties concerned of the building's significance in the community will help to ensure that the needed work is carried out in the most sensitive manner.



Davidson County Courthouse  
 Public Square  
 Nashville, Davidson County, Tennessee

Tax Map 1" = 100'

Courthouse  
 see