

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

PH0246757

FOR NPS USE ONLY	
RECEIVED	OCT 8 1975
DATE ENTERED	OCT 29 1975

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

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

**1 NAME**

HISTORIC  
Merced County Courthouse  
AND/OR COMMON  
Merced County Courthouse

**2 LOCATION**

STREET & NUMBER  
West 21st and 'N' Street  
CITY, TOWN  
Merced  
STATE  
California

--- VICINITY OF  
06

--- "NO" FOR PUBLICATION  
CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT  
15

COUNTY  
Merced

CODE  
047

**3 CLASSIFICATION**

CATEGORY	OWNERSHIP	STATUS	PRESENT USE
<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 checked="" type="checkbox"/> PARK
<input type="checkbox"/> STRUCTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> BOTH	<input type="checkbox"/> WORK IN PROGRESS	<input checked="" 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"/> IN PROCESS	<input type="checkbox"/> YES: RESTRICTED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> GOVERNMENT <input type="checkbox"/> SCIENTIFIC
	<input type="checkbox"/> BEING CONSIDERED	<input checked="" 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  
Merced County  
STREET & NUMBER  
West 21st and 'N' Street - Merced County Courthouse Park  
CITY, TOWN  
Merced  
STATE  
California

--- VICINITY OF  
California

**5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION**

COURTHOUSE,  
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.  
Merced County Records Office  
STREET & NUMBER  
West 21st and 'N' Street - Merced County Courthouse Park  
CITY, TOWN  
Merced  
STATE  
California

**6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS**

TITLE  
Merced County Historical Advisory Committee  
DATE

--- FEDERAL --- STATE  COUNTY --- LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR  
SURVEY RECORDS  
Merced County Parks and Recreation Division  
CITY, TOWN  
Merced  
STATE  
California

# 7 DESCRIPTION

CONDITION		CHECK ONE	CHECK ONE
<input type="checkbox"/> EXCELLENT	<input type="checkbox"/> DETERIORATED	<input type="checkbox"/> UNALTERED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ORIGINAL SITE
<input checked="" 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

## MERCED COUNTY COURTHOUSE ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

The Merced County Courthouse, completed May 7, 1875, is a fine example of the expertise of one of the California State Capitol Architects, A. A. Bennett. Mr. Bennett, the winner of a competition, was awarded the prize of \$500 plus six per cent of the building costs. His services included supervision of the construction. The building was constructed for \$55,970 by A. W. Burrell and Company. This building is the best proportioned and well handled of its type in central California. Its facade, rendered eclectically in the Italian Renaissance style, is typical of the American esthetic for public buildings before the turn of the century. True to tradition, this courthouse symbolically illustrates the American ideal of respect for justice. The sensitive handling of this building is perhaps due in part to its having preceded the transition from eclecticism to Classic design. The commercial glut of Classicism was precipitated by the World's Columbian Exhibition of 1893.

This sixty by ninety five foot building consists of a three storied brick structure and rises to a height of sixty feet. The building is plastered and painted white. Modeled in a manner similar to the Renaissance Italian Palazzo, the exterior walls have a smooth texture at the ground floor, with stonework modeled in plaster at the first floor and smooth treatment again on the second floor facade. The building was designed to sit in a four block landscaped park and is oriented on a north-east axis. Over half of the original park is maintained as such, however, subsequent public buildings have encroached from the north side. The main entrance and two other sides are framed by the original trees, and thus, the major view remains relatively intact.

Only the addition of one wing to the north side in 1913 has changed the original appearance. Instead of detracting from the building, however, the addition enhances the total design by the effective juxtaposition of a large mass to a smaller one. This modification creates a stronger composition than either could have achieved singularly. The addition consists of the assessor's office on the ground floor with the recorder's office and mezzanine on the second floor. Natural illumination of the recorder's office and mezzanine was provided by a large skylight with artificial illumination by gas light. Entry to these offices is from the east through a hall that joins the original building with the later structure.

The south side of the building has a portico with balcony which delineates the major entry. The portico is proportioned as gracefully as that of the Erechtheion. However, Mr. Bennett, unlike Mnesicles, chose Doric shafts with Corinthian capitals for the portico columns. The balcony is trimmed with a spindled wooden handrail.

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MERCED COUNTY COURTHOUSE ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

The various floors of the building are divided by simple double loaded corridors broken on one side by stairs. The corridor is terminated by the assessor's office at the north end of the ground floor and by the recorder's office above on the first floor. The stairs, decorated with darkly stained and highly carved redwood newel posts, are complemented by carved railing.

The functions carried out on each floor are arranged in ascending order of actual or symbolic importance. Entering from the south, one walks under the portico stairs, across a checkerboard patterned marble walk and through doors to arrive at the surveyor's office. The sheriff's office and the jail were originally located further down the hall. The superior court room is located on the top floor. The judge's bench, which has long since disappeared, was monumental. Following tradition, the bench was designed to literally place the judge on a pedestal in order that justice be revered.

Originally the court room was divided into two parts. One half was used for public seating, while the other half was occupied by the jury box and the bench. The two areas were separated by a dark, stained redwood railing. Natural illumination of the court room was admitted through seven windows and a beautiful skylight. Although the skylight has been roofed over, it still remains visible from inside the building. Artificial illumination was provided by gas light.

Pot bellied stoves, which burned wood, provided heat for each room. The flues were concealed in the walls but appeared on the roof as ornate chimneys. The stoves were later replaced by steam radiators. Running water was pumped by a windmill and stored in two brick cisterns near the building, but by 1889, water was piped directly from Lake Yosemite. An octagonal shaped outhouse served courthouse personnel during this era, but was replaced by indoor facilities in the early 1900's.

The building's roof, constructed of redwood trusses is crossed by two vaults and crowned by a cupola. The cupola's dome rests on two stacked drums. Access to the drums is by the original wooden spiral stairs. The lower drum is decorated with doubled columns in the Palladian motif, with Corinthian capitals and windows arched in the Roman style. The upper drum is also pierced by Roman style windows which are flanked by pilasters, which complement the lower drum. The small dome's graceful design, reminiscent of Brunelleschi's *Duomo*, is topped by a laminated wooden statue of Minerva, the Roman goddess of wisdom. Wooden statues of justice adorn

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three of the vault ends. A possible fourth statue of justice was not placed at the north end, perhaps indicating that the architect master planned the later addition. The roof is handsomely trimmed by a parapet of spindled handrails. The handrails are interrupted at roof midpoint by vaults and by chimneys located at the corners of the roof.

A courthouse in Fresno, California, also completed in 1875, was almost identical in every detail to the one in Merced. It was so similar that one is drawn to conclude that Mr. Bennett was also the architect for this courthouse. Unfortunately, the Fresno courthouse was drastically modified in 1893 by the addition of two wings, three stories high. The addition was done in the classic style. Classicism was at the apex of its popularity in that year. A monumental portico and a larger dome were also added. These additions, necessitated by an earlier fire and crowded facilities, caused the well proportioned original building to become lost within a clumsy shell. Later, the entire building at Fresno was demolished. Its twin in Merced remains relatively unscarred.

# 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 type="checkbox"/> ART	<input type="checkbox"/> ENGINEERING	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSIC	<input type="checkbox"/> THEATER
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCE	<input type="checkbox"/> EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> PHILOSOPHY	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
<input type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNICATIONS	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRY	<input type="checkbox"/> POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY)
		<input type="checkbox"/> INVENTION		

SPECIFIC DATES *March 5, 1873*

BUILDER/ARCHITECT

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

### ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

1. This courthouse is a physical reminder of the transition of the area from a struggling pioneer community to a prospering county.
2. This building was and still is a major visual city and county landmark.
3. This building is one of few historic buildings that has suffered only minor alteration to its original appearance. Although courthouse functions were moved to a new building in March of 1975, this building served its original purpose for 100 years.
4. This building is the best example of the Italian Renaissance revival remaining between Sacramento and Los Angeles.
5. This building's almost identical twin has already been destroyed.
6. This building is in itself a museum of genre architecture.
7. This building could be used in the future as a county cultural museum and/or a county agricultural museum. There is no museum in Merced at this time.

# 9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

BIBLIOGRAPHY

MERCED COUNTY OFFICIAL RECORDS

OUTCALT, JOHN: HISTORY OF MERCED COUNTY

# 10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY 10.8 acres

UTM REFERENCES

A	1,0	7 2,3 2,2,0	4,1 3,1 6 3 0	B	1,0	7 2,3 1,5,0	4,1 3,1 4 8 0
	ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING		ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING
C	1,0	7 2,2 8,8,0	4,1 3,1 6 0 0	D	1,0	7 2,2 9,4,0	4,1 3,1 7 9 0
	ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING		ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING

### VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

The site has a northeasterly orientation. It is bounded on the north by West 21st Street, running in a northwesterly direction. The eastern boundary is formed by M Street, running in a northeasterly direction. The southern boundary is formed by West 20th Street, running in a northwesterly direction, and the western boundary is formed by O Street, running in a northeasterly direction.

### 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

Pat Cosentino, Superintendent

ORGANIZATION

Merced County Parks and Recreation Division

DATE

7-7-75

STREET & NUMBER

Merced County Courthouse

TELEPHONE

CITY OR TOWN

Merced

STATE

California

# 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.

SIGNATURE

TITLE

State Herbert Khodes

DATE

7/24/75

FOR NPS USE ONLY: Historic Preservation Officer

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

DATE

10/29/75

DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF ARCHEOLOGY AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION

DATE

10/21/75

ATTEST:

Ronald M. Brinkley  
KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

act

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A GUIDE TO ARCHITECTURE IN SAN FRANCISCO AND NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

David Gebhard

Roger Montgomery

Robert Winter

John Woodbridge

Sally Woodbridge

Publisher: Peregrine Smith, Inc., 1973

P. O. Box 11606, Salt Lake City, Utah 84111

MERCED SUN STAR, Monday, September 8, 1969

HISTORY OF MERCED COUNTY, Elliot & Moore 1881

STRUCTURAL INVESTIGATION OF THE FRESNO COUNTY COURHOUSE

Arthur A. Sauer & Associates, Civil & Structural Engineers

104 North Fulton Street, Fresno, California 93721