

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

NOV 28 1989

# National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, styles, materials, and areas of significance, enter only the categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900a). Type all entries.

### 1. Name of Property

historic name Washington County Courthouse  
other names/site number WN02-1

### 2. Location

street & number 16th St bet Colfax & South Sts N/A not for publication  
city, town Blair N/A vicinity  
state Nebraska code NE county Washington code 177 zip code 68008

### 3. Classification

Ownership of Property	Category of Property	Number of Resources within Property	
<input type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> building(s)	Contributing	Noncontributing
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> public-local	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> district	<u>1</u>	<u>          </u> buildings
<input type="checkbox"/> public-state	<input type="checkbox"/> site	<u>          </u>	<u>          </u> sites
<input type="checkbox"/> public-Federal	<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<u>          </u>	<u>          </u> structures
	<input type="checkbox"/> object	<u>1</u>	<u>          </u> objects
		<u>2</u>	<u>0</u> Total

Name of related multiple property listing: County Courthouses of Nebraska  
Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

### 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 A. Hanson September 7, 1989  
Signature of certifying official 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. Patrick Andrus 1/10/90  
 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): \_\_\_\_\_

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)

Renaissance Revival

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation stone

walls brick

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)

Politics/government

Architecture

Period of Significance

1888-1939

Significant Dates

N/A

1889-91

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Significant Person

N/A

Architect/Builder

Placey, O.H.

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:

- [x] 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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Acreeage of property 2.5 acres

UTM References

A	<u>1</u> <u>4</u>   <u>7</u> <u>3</u> <u>8</u> <u>9</u> <u>9</u> <u>0</u>   <u>4</u> <u>6</u> <u>0</u> <u>2</u> <u>4</u> <u>7</u> <u>0</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 November 8, 1989
street & number	3140 Easton Boulevard telephone (515) 266-4964
city or town	Des Moines state Iowa zip code 50317

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The Washington County Courthouse is an excellent, relatively unaltered example of the Property Type, County Capitol. Identifying features include: corner towers and central dome, permanent costly materials, elaborate ornamentation, Romanesque Revival stylistic influence, and impression of a government building of permanence and solidity. To meet changing law enforcement requirements, a large one-story jail has been added to the rear; the design is well handled and is not intrusive. A unique feature among Nebraska courthouses are the painted metal forms found in the gables over the two entrances. The objects symbolize farming in the county, the immigrant experience, and county government. Eighteen extant County Capitols were built between 1888 and 1907 across Nebraska. With its 1889-91 construction date, the Washington County Courthouse is among the earlier examples.

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The Washington County Courthouse consists of two stories on a raised basement. The basement level is rusticated rough Warrenburg, Missouri sandstone. The upper walls are faced with St. Louis brick. Ribbons of the contrasting stone trim form continuous sills and lintels and run around the design, an effective unifying feature.

A notable characteristic are the four corner towers that firmly anchor the design and the lofty central dome placed astride a hipped roof. Additional gables highlight slightly projecting bays on all sides. The principal entrance is on the west facade with a secondary entry to the north. While the courthouse was designed symmetrically with regularly spaced bays and towers, lacking are entrances on all sides as found on other County Capitols, despite the ample courthouse square.

The floorplan of the 94x62' courthouse reflects the presence of but two entrances. A long hallway runs north and south and intersects at the center with a small stub of an entry hall from the main entrance on the west. The clerk's office and the treasurer's office flank this main entrance, in the area most accessible to the public. Vault placement varied with the office, an unusual arrangement in County Capitols. Ranged along the east end from north to south (in 1936) were offices for the school superintendent, sheriff, and county judge, and the county court room was in the southeast corner.

Also atypical is the location of the District Court Room on the second floor. In many courthouses, this room runs the length of a facade. Here the short (54') expanse enjoys views on the east and west sides while the longer (62') expanse opens onto corner offices as well as stairs on both the north and south ends of the building.

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The Washington County Courthouse was not executed in just one architectural style, although the Renaissance Revival style dominates in massing and overall restrained approach. There are also elements from the Italianate and Romanesque Revival styles. Features from the latter include the groups of small round-arched windows, use of contrasting brick and stone, and the smooth column with elaborate foliated capital at the entrance. The fancy metal cornice with its brackets represents an Italianate or other Late Victorian stylistic influence and was likely ordered from a builders catalog. Renaissance Revival components include stone courses at the lintel and sill level of windows and the symmetry. The consoles that outline the gable ends and the dome, especially the classical detail of the triangular pediments and engaged columns, recall earlier American public buildings. Still other elements place the courthouse firmly in the Victorian era: the irregular outline, many chimneys, use of contrasting materials.

A unique feature not found on other Nebraska courthouses are the painted metal forms in the gables over the two entrances. Several subjects--cornucopia, wheat, pumpkins--call attention to the fertile agricultural foundation of the county, while the ship in full sail likely recalls the immigrant experience and the shields symbolize county government. Another highly unusual feature of the building are the stone rosettes at the corners of windows; up to seven patterns (perhaps more) are used.

Some interior elements remain, including double fireplaces (placed back-to-back to heat two rooms) and vault doors with painted scenes on them. There have been substantial and regular interior modifications, beginning in 1936 with a WPA project. The courtroom and other offices have lowered ceilings and fluorescent lighting, a typical change in county courthouses. Considerable original courtroom woodwork and furnishings remain, including a nicely curving bar between spectator and court space.

Changes to the exterior of the courthouse are minimal and include storm windows, removal of all but one chimney, new roofing in 1980, and a modern brick and glass entrance on the north. In addition, the c. 1975 County-City Law Enforcement and Detention Facility is a one-story brick-faced rectangular addition to the rear of the courthouse. The low scale, use of similar materials, and design of the addition make it a relatively unobtrusive change.

The large courthouse square the Washington County Courthouse enjoys further enhances its imposing appearance. A prominently placed Civil War Union Army soldier is one of a number of similar statues the Grand Army of the Republic had placed on courthouse grounds across the state. It

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was originally located nearby in the street but was later moved to its present location directly in front of the main entrance. The GAR statue, a contributing element, is the only object on the ample tree-strewn courthouse square.

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The Washington 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 Washington County. It is a notable example of public architecture in the community and contains good examples of design features and facilities distinctive to its design and use as a courthouse. A unique feature not found on other Nebraska courthouses are the painted metal forms in the gable ends that symbolize farming in the county, the immigrant experience, and county government.

Eighteen extant County Capitols were built between 1888 and 1907 across Nebraska. With its 1889-91 construction date, the Washington County Courthouse is among the earlier examples. 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 elaborate ornamentation. Elements of the design combine to convey an impression of a government building of permanence and solidity, another feature of the County Capitol. The Period of Significance is 1889, when construction began, to 1939, when the "fifty year rule" takes effect. The Washington 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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Washington County is located along the Missouri River and is adjacent to Douglas County (Omaha). With this important riverfront location, the county was among the earliest organized in Nebraska and was established in 1854.

As was commonly the case, early residents vied for the county seat designation. Washington County was the only Nebraska county where there was a death related to county seat selection, according to Schellenberg's book on county seat wars. In the 1850s and 1860s, the towns of De Soto and Fort Calhoun wanted to be county seat. A crowd of De Soto backers mounted a siege on the log courthouse at Fort Calhoun, and one man was killed in the hostilities. Fort Calhoun surrendered the county records to the mob after a two-day stand-off, but later regained the county seat designation in the appropriate manner, an election.

Blair, the present county seat, attained that standing in 1869. The

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change underlined the ascendancy of the railroad as the key mode of transportation over the steamboat. After Washington County voters approved a \$75,000 bond issue to help finance rail construction across the county in 1868, John I. Blair's line (part of the Chicago & Northwestern system) entered the county. It crossed the Missouri River from Iowa into Nebraska at a natural opening in the bluffs. This site effectively eliminated De Soto's hopes of rail service from that line. The railroad company, as was its typical practice, bought land and established a rail stop, Blair. On March 10, 1869, the first lots in Blair were sold. With the advantages of rail service and a more central location than Fort Calhoun, Blair won the county seat designation in the election held in 1869.

Blair developed as an agricultural shipping point and county seat. By 1876 the population was an estimated 1,500. Beginning in 1882, the community experienced a short-lived boom. The Chicago & Northwestern Railroad built a new bridge across the Missouri, and many workers came to Blair to work on the project.

In 1889 Washington County Supervisors sought to build the present courthouse. Blair precinct voters, who naturally wanted to ensure that a new courthouse would be built in their community, voted a separate \$5,000 bond issue to aid in courthouse construction. This was in addition to the \$35,000 countywide bond issue that passed in June 1889.

Following the successful bond election, the county examined plans submitted by architects from Omaha, Lincoln, and Superior, Nebraska, and Kansas City. The careful building committee traveled to Washington, Kansas to see the courthouse there by Kansas City architect Schrage. They then eliminated Schrage from consideration. After ten ballots, Lincoln architect O.H. Placey was selected on June 29, 1889.

Placey had moved to Lincoln from Chicago sometime between 1883 and 1885. He is known to have designed two other courthouses: the Shelby County Courthouse, Shelbyville, Illinois (1879-80) and, with William Gray, the York County Courthouse, York, Nebraska (1885-88) (not extant). In addition, Placey submitted designs that were not accepted for four other Nebraska county courthouses, two in Illinois, and one each in Indiana and Wisconsin. The massing of Placey's Washington County Courthouse, Placey & Gray's York County Courthouse, and Gray's Johnson, Hamilton, and Cass County Courthouses are the same.

On September 10, 1889, the board opened bids for the general contractor position and selected Richards & Company of Omaha. Like the Gage County board of supervisors, the Washington County board maintained an active



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interest in courthouse construction. They voted on the type of heating system, to "box and protect the trees from damage," and whether or not to move the cess pool 50' rather than 16' (vote failed).

The project encountered some delays and difficulties. In December 1889 the superintendent of construction reported that the stone for the basement that was then being laid was not up to the quality specified and would therefore be removed. Nonetheless, the cornerstone was apparently laid that same month, for the board adjourned for that purpose on December 13, 1889. Construction then ceased for the winter until March 1, 1890. Progress had advanced sufficiently by July 15 of that year for the board to visit vault suppliers in Omaha.

A typical indication of completion is taking out insurance. In August 1890, the board was ready to insure the courthouse, but only for \$20,000, probably a reflection that it was not complete. In October the architect abruptly resigned, apparently out of frustration. The board was also annoyed, as their minutes for October 18 reflect:

And now comes O.H. Placey, architect and announces to the Board in open session that from this time on he positively refuses to have anything to do, in and above the further work and completion of the new Court House and bid the Board good bye and took his hat and passed out [of the room, presumably].

The board was so displeased that they passed a resolution stating that since Placey had removed himself as architect, they "no longer recognize the said O.H. Placey as the Architect but in the event of our needing one we will call in some other architect...."

The courthouse was not completed until March 18, 1891 when the contractor "tendered the keys of the Court House to the Committee for and on behalf of the County...[which] accepted said court house."

Washington County residents continue to value the courthouse and its spacious grounds. The courthouse square is the site of a summer festival.

(Note: quotes are from board of supervisors' minutes.)

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Works Progress Administration. Survey of County Courthouse Records. 1936.  
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Goeldner, Paul. "Temples of Justice: 19th Century Courthouses in the Midwest and Texas." Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1971.  
Schrader, Forrest. A History of Washington County, Nebraska. Omaha: Magic City Printing Co., 1937.  
Zhoades, John A. "Blair the Town Beautiful." [1926]  
Schellenberg, James A. Conflict between Communities. American County Seat Wars. New York: Paragon House Publishers, 1987.

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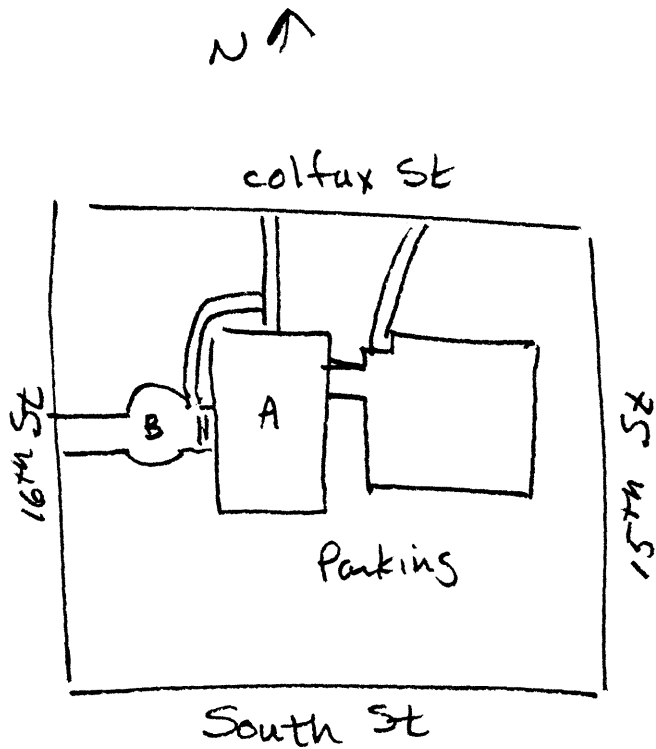
Verbal Boundary Description

The nominated property occupies all lots (1-12) in Block 75 of the Original Plat of Blair and is roughly 360x300' in size.

Boundary Justification

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

WASHINGTON COUNTY  
COURTHOUSE (WNO2-1)  
Blair, NE



Contributing

A - courthouse + jail  
addition - bldg

B - GAR statue, object

Not to scale