

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form

Historic Downtown Hartford

Continuation sheet

Item number

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First National Bank Building
50 State Street

1899
Photograph 5,
Building #17

Description

Designed in the Beaux-Arts style by Ernest Flagg, the First National Bank Building is a 7-story, stone and brick structure facing south toward the Old State House in the center of downtown Hartford. The building is a narrow rectangle, 40 x 118 feet, in the middle of the block on State Street.

Chief architectural interest lies in the elaborately detailed facade. The original appearance of the first floor is obscured by alterations of mid-20th century. As built, the first floor was rusticated stone with three tall rectangular apertures, the two on the right being windows with iron grilles at the bottom and tall voussoirs at the top. The doorway on the left had a Gibbs surround, similar to those seen in the second floor, under an iron balcony supported by consoles.

Above the first floor, the facade retains its original appearance. The second-floor tripartite windows with transoms are enclosed in segmental Gibbs surrounds under a molded cornice. The third-, fourth- and fifth-floor tripartite windows are treated as components of 3-story round-arched openings. The window frames mullions and spandrels are a dark wood between the piers of brick. The arches have key consoles and spring from imposts that rest on decorated supports. Above the arcade there is a broad, projecting molded cornice with modillion blocks supported by paired brackets. Sixth-floor windows are rectangular with molded architraves and key consoles under a narrow molding that divides the sixth and seventh stories. Windows at the seventh floor are paired, in three dormers. The central dormer is segmental and the flanking dormers gabled, all supported by console brackets and projecting from a standing-seam metal Mansard roof. Chimneys that rise right and left have lost their segmental caps but continue to be connected by iron cresting that echoes the iron window grilles and balcony original to the first floor.

The east elevation has eight rectangular, 1-over-1 windows in a plain brick wall. A 2-story addition was built on the rear in 1925, and penthouse was added to the roof in mid-20th century. The rear addition, housing boiler, toilets and mechanical room, and the pent house were removed in 1984. Original interior features, some of which remain, were carried out in wood and marble. The lobby has marble wainscoting that extends to the height of the doors, between marble pilasters. The principal doorway from the lobby to the east, where the main banking area originally was located, has marble molding and key console similar to those on the facade. Some of the upper floors have original window surrounds and casings and hardware for the casement tripartite front windows. The trim has

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dark finish. The door and window surrounds are made up of two broad band moldings that return at the bases, an unusual feature. In the ceiling of the main banking room heavy beams with moldings and dentil courses form a coffered pattern. (Photograph 5A) An occasional original built-in cupboard remains, and several radiator housings of dark wood with marble tops. Baseboards were marble; some remain, as do some of the dark finish, horizontal panel doors. The interior structural system uses steel columns and beams with flat brick vaults and cinders.

Significance - Criterion C, Architecture

The First National Bank Building is exceptional in Hartford for its Beaux-Arts style and for its elegance. It was also one of the first office buildings in the city to use interior steel construction.

The first National Bank had occupied a section of the United States Hotel building on this site. The United States Hotel Building was a Federal, 4-story commercial block that extended along State Street, only the western part being actually used as a hotel. The First National Bank was in the easternmost section. The bank demolished its end section of the United States Hotel to build its new structure.

The bank building reflects the contemporary practice of dividing a tall building into three sections, based on the classical column. In the bank building, the first two stories are analogous to the base, the next three stories to the shaft and the top two stories to the capital. Each section is set apart by a distinctive design of its own.

The man responsible for the successful design of the First National Bank Building was Ernest Flagg (1857-1947) of New York, an 1888 graduate of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. In the first decade of his practice he won the competition for St. Luke's Hospital, New York, and started his work, for which he is probably most famous, at the United States Naval Academy. He later executed commission for the Corcoran Art Gallery (1898) in Washington and the 41-story Singer Building (1908) and Charles Scribner bookstore (1912) in New York.

Flagg's work was in step with the times. It was gracious, flowing and carefully detailed. He designed handsome buildings of classical inspiration that fitted with the "City Beautiful" movement of the early 20th century. His solution for the narrow city lot of the First National Bank provided a well-designed and impressive facade suitable to the bank's image and interior space of corresponding quality and detail.

In Hartford Flagg also designed important alterations and additions to the Connecticut Mutual Life Insurance Co. building (demolished) at the northwest corner of Main and Pearl streets in 1901. In 1897 he prepared plans

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for Immanuel Church at the northeast corner of Farmington Avenue and Woodland Street and the Handsome House two doors east of the church, both elegant designs executed in red brick. Ernest Flagg was the half brother of Charles Noel Flagg, well-known Hartford portrait painter.

Geographical Data

Acreage: Less than one acre
UTM Reference: 18/693370/4626390
Boundary: City map No. 4, parcel No. 761