



# United States Department of the Interior

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE  
1849 C Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20240

July 22, 2010

Notice to file:

This property has been automatically listed in the National Register of Historic Places. This is due to the fact that the publication of our Federal Register Notice: "National Register of Historic Places: Pending Nominations and Other Actions" was delayed beyond our control to the point where the mandated 15 day public comment period ended after our required 45 day time frame to act on the nomination. If the 45<sup>th</sup> day falls on a weekend or Federal holiday, the property will be automatically listed the next business day. The nomination is technically adequate and meets the National Register criteria for evaluation, and thus, automatically listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

Edson H. Beall  
Historian  
National Register of Historic Places  
Phone: 202-354-2255  
E-mail: [Edson\\_Beall@nps.gov](mailto:Edson_Beall@nps.gov)  
Web: [www.nps.gov/history/nr](http://www.nps.gov/history/nr)

MAY 21 2010



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United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" on the appropriate line or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name LIBERTY BUILDING  
other names/site number Bankers Life Insurance Company, WHO Radio, American Mutual Life Insurance Co.

2. Location

street & number 418 Sixth Avenue N/A not for publication  
city or town Des Moines N/A vicinity  
state Iowa code IA county Polk code 153 zip code 50309

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, 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. I recommend that this property be considered significant ( nationally  statewide  locally). ( See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Baird A. Mitchell, DSHPO June 3, 2010  
Signature of certifying official/Title Date  
**STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA**  
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property ( meets  does not meet) the National Register criteria. ( See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title Date  
State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

- I hereby certify that the property is:
- entered in the National Register.  
 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)

Edson Beall Signature of Keeper 7.22.10 Date of Action

Liberty Building  
Name of Property

Polk County, Iowa  
County and State

**5. Classification**

**Ownership of Property**    **Category of Property**  
(Check as many lines as apply)    (Check only one line)

- |                                             |                                                 |
|---------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> public-local       | <input type="checkbox"/> district               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> public-State       | <input type="checkbox"/> site                   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> public-Federal     | <input type="checkbox"/> structure              |
|                                             | <input type="checkbox"/> object                 |

**Number of Resources within Property**  
(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	buildings
		sites
		structures
		objects
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	Total

**Name of related multiple property listing**  
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

**Number of contributing resources  
previously listed in the National Register**

The Architectural Legacy of Proudfoot and Bird in Iowa, 1882-1940

N/A

**6. Function or Use**

**Historic Functions**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

COMMERCE/TRADE/business

COMMUNICATIONS

**Current Functions**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

COMMERCE/TRADE/business

DOMESTIC/multiple dwelling

**7. Description**

**Architectural Classification**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

LATE 19TH AND EARLY 20TH CENTURY

AMERICAN MOVEMENTS/Skyscraper

**Materials**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation Concrete

walls Brick

Stone

roof Asphalt

other Terra Cotta

**Narrative Description**

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

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Liberty Building, Polk County, Iowa.

**GENERAL DESCRIPTION**

The immediate site of the Liberty Building is topographically level. The building is located in the heart of downtown Des Moines, along Grand Avenue, one of the downtown's three principal east-west thoroughfares. Downtown Des Moines was originally platted on a grid oriented to the Des Moines River, which flows slightly northwest to southeast through the downtown. Later, the city's plats north of Grand Avenue were aligned to those cardinal points. The site of the Liberty Building stands at the intersection of these two layouts. As a result, Sixth Avenue bends to the northeast at this point. Sixth Avenue developed in Des Moines during the 19th century as a major downtown street with prestigious properties, including the Fleming Building (NRHP), Equitable of Iowa Building (nonextant), and St. Ambrose Roman Catholic Cathedral. The Home Federal Savings & Loan Association, a building designed by Mies van der Rohe, built in the 1960s, and located at 601, Grand Avenue, is situated directly across the street from the Liberty Building.

The Liberty Building is situated on Lots 7 and 8 of Commissioner's Addition to the City of Des Moines. This parcel measures about 132 feet x 120 feet (east-west frontage by north-south frontage).

Embedded images for this property are found at the end of this nomination on pages 31-48. They include a map, architect drawings, floor plans, historic images, and other pertinent graphic material.

The Liberty Building is a 12-story commercial edifice, built on a poured concrete foundation, and constructed on a reinforced concrete and steel frame with curtain walls of tan-colored brick trimmed in stone. Completed and first occupied in 1924, the exterior of the building remains very much as originally built except for replacement windows installed in 2005-2006. In the 1980s, the City of Des Moines began the development of a skywalk system throughout the city's downtown. These elevated corridors link downtown buildings together through enclosed corridors situated above alleys and across streets and adjacent to the second floors of buildings. Skywalks are situated along the south and west elevations of the Liberty Building.

In 2003, KC Holdings VI, a development firm purchased the Liberty Building with the intention of converting certain of its floors into condominium units and redeveloping commercial usage on other floors. As part of this project in 2005-2006, the developer installed new windows throughout the building and gutted much of the first floor and all of floors two through 11. A portion of the first floor subsequently was converted to a health club; part of the first floor remained gutted; the second floor was converted into a bank and fitness center; and floors nine through 11 were converted into residential condominium units. Some of the condominiums sold; the others remained unsold.

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Throughout this time, the 12th floor remained unaffected and in commercial use. Then, in 2009, Liberty Building Development Group, L.L.C., the current owner of the building (except for the sold condominiums), purchased the Liberty Building and began negotiations to redevelop the gutted portions of the building as an hotel.

**BUILDING**

The Liberty Building possesses a rectangular, 125 foot x 132 foot footprint on its first and second floors. The footprint of floors three through twelve is L-shaped. (See Figure #7.) The bottom two floors are covered with a flat roof of rubber membrane, surmounted by mechanical equipment, and hidden from the street by surrounding buildings.

The top ten stories of the building feature an "L"-shaped footprint. One stroke of the "L" faces Sixth Avenue. It measures 125 feet by 50 feet. The other stroke of the "L" faces Grand Avenue and measures 132 feet by 55 feet. In the 1980s, a triangularly shaped extension was constructed at the rear of the 12th floor of the building. (See Photo #3.) It measures 22 feet x 22 feet x 31 feet. (See Figure #7.) An elevator house is situated above the 12th floor set back from the east elevation of the building. A skywalk—one among many of these elevated corridors in downtown Des Moines—runs along the south and west elevations of the Liberty Building. Several I-beams, attached to the building's second floor, support it. The skywalk is located about 14 feet above grade and situated above alleys next to the building. The skywalk is constructed of metal and glass, attached to the building by steel I-beams, and situated on secondary facades. Only minimal original material was removed from the south elevation of the building—several second story windows—to provide access to it from the skywalk.

The condition of the Liberty Building is excellent, having been well maintained since its original construction.

Exterior

The east façade of the Liberty Building possesses seven bays on the first and second floors and 12 bays on the upper floors. The main entrance to the building is situated in the middle bay on the first floor. It features a recessed and unenclosed entryway surmounted by an arch, which extends to the second floor. The bays on the far north and far south are set wider apart from the others on each

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floor to relieve any feeling of regimentation and to frame the other bays. Windows occupy all of the upper story bays and are symmetrically organized.

The north façade of the building possesses eight bays on the first and second floors and 14 bays on the upper floors. The architectural design of the north elevation is virtually the same as that of the east elevation except that the former lacks the recessed entryway found on the latter.

The first floor of the east and north elevations are clad with limestone. A band of dentils separates the second and third floors. The upper brick curtain walls of the building are constructed of creamy yellow-colored brick. A stone belt course separates the tenth and eleventh floors of the east and north elevations. A stone entablature surmounts the 12th floor and features a frieze, a band of dentils, and a cornice. The west and south elevations of the building lack the stone facing on the first and second floors, the belt course, and the entablature.

The storefronts on the east and north elevations feature paired windows with 2/1 pane configurations in each bay of the elevation. The windows on the second floor of the building repeat this configuration, although the paired windows there are smaller than on the first floor. The top ten floors of the Liberty Building repeat the 2/1 pane configuration of the first two floors, but these windows are smaller. All of these windows are of metal fabrication and were installed in 2005-2006.

The south and west elevations of the skyscraper are constructed of a creamy yellow-colored brick. In 2005, a number of metal balconies are affixed to these elevations. The south elevation has one balcony affixed to the most westerly bay on the ninth floor and one balcony on the most westerly bay on the tenth floor. Three balconies are affixed on the west elevation, one each on the floors 9, 10, 11, and 12. These balconies were installed in 2005-2006.

The main entrance to the Liberty Building is situated on Sixth Avenue and is as the most richly decorated architectural feature of the edifice. This entrance stands as an open vestibule, inset from the front elevation of the building and piercing the second floor, and is covered with a vaulted roof of terra cotta embellished with classically inspired detailing. The vestibule walls are clad with green marble. Fanlight windows are situated on the north, west, and south elevations of the vestibule and are situated at the second floor level. A terra cotta plaque, picturing symbols of commerce (a windmill, beaver, and barrels) and flanked by terra cotta panels, is situated above the main entrance on the second floor and references Colonial New York:

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The beavers, the four flour-barrels, and the windmill sails in the coat of arms of New York, designed in 1686, symbolize the sources of its early wealth. (Avery: 120)

A terra cotta name plaque reading "Liberty Building" is centered on the east elevation between the fourth and fifth floors.

The Liberty Building is covered with a flat roof with a rubber membrane surface installed during the 2007 renovation of the building. A flagpole is situated near the northeast corner of the building. The base of this flagpole is mounted on a gear so that the pole can be raised and lowered from a horizontal position.

Interior

The interior of the Liberty Building comes as a surprise to the first-time visitor. After passing through the building's soaring Sixth Avenue entrance, he enters a 1-story lobby of modest proportions. In 2005, the surface finishes of the lobby on the ground floor were remodeled, although its floor plan and bank of four elevators remained unaffected. When originally constructed, the upper floors of the Liberty Building emphasized function and utility with little decorative embellishment. Each floor possesses about 12,000 square feet, an unexpected revelation and smaller than anticipated, given the building's massive exterior appearance.

When the Liberty Building first opened in 1924, the Consumers Coal Company occupied the storefronts along Grand Avenue. The McNerney Drug Store occupied the northeast storefront. Floors three through ten provided office space for Bankers Life. These floors featured open floor plans without partitions. In addition to Bankers Life, other insurance firms also maintained offices on the upper floors, including the Standard Life Insurance Company and Aetna Fire Insurance Company, along with the J. C. Ferguson Realty Company and other commercial enterprises. (*Des Moines Sunday Register*, March 30, 1924)

Radio station WHO originally occupied the 11th floor. In 2005-2006, this floor was gutted and replaced with condominium units. The 12th floor originally served as the executive offices for Bankers Life. In the 1980s or 1990s, this floor was remodeled and presently serves as the offices of a stock brokerage firm. At the same time, a triangularly shaped extension of the 12th floor was constructed in the el of its west and south elevations.

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Radio Station

WHO Radio Station, an institution now ingrained in the culture of Iowa and the Midwest, originated in the Liberty Building and was one of its first occupants. The establishment of WHO in the Liberty Building included the construction of twin 115-foot radio towers erected on the northwest and southeast corners of the building. According to one source:

In a high wind that was more characteristic of March than April, members of Local 67, of the Iron Workers union were today putting the finishing touches to the 115-foot radio towers of Station WHO (Bankers Life Insurance company) on top of the Liberty building.

The bolted steel towers are anchored to the steel structure of the building, and rise from a base sixteen feet wide to a tip of 14 inches. They are guaranteed by the makers against wind up to a velocity of 125 miles an hour. Officials in charge of the installation of the radio equipment expected to have the "T" type antennae in place today, and will inaugurate the broadcast programs Monday or Tuesday. (*Des Moines Capital*, April 13, 1924.

This newspaper article included a photograph of the two new towers. The *Des Moines Tribune* published another photograph of them on April 5, 1924. (See Figure #16.)

The broadcast studio for WHO was located on the 11th floor of the Liberty Building. The studio included a recital room with a grand piano and luxurious furnishings, operating room with transmitting power panel and operator's desk with its receiver and loudspeaker, reception room, and control room. None of these resources remains extant. The Central Broadcasting Corporation subsequently purchased WHO and relocated its broadcast facilities from the Liberty Building to 914 Walnut Street in downtown Des Moines in the early 1930s. (City directories 1932-1933: 898, 810) The two aerial towers were removed then from the roof of the Liberty Building.

Interior Alterations

In 2005-2006, the previous owner of the building renovated many interior spaces of the Liberty Building. A new health club was constructed on the north half of the first floor and an exercise space built on the second floor. The balance of the second floor and the third floor remained unchanged as offices, having been remodeled in the 1980s. Floors four through eleven were gutted,



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including the removal of window woodwork. The offices on the top floor of the building remained unchanged, having undergone remodeling in the 1980s. As part of the 2006-2007 renovations, floors nine through eleven were converted into residential condominiums. Because the sale of these units was soft, the planned construction of condominiums on the 4th through 8th floors ceased. They remained gutted, along with the south portion of the first floor. (On the 8th floor, the framing and dry wall were completed for the condominium units, but the units were never completed.)

**INTEGRITY CONSIDERATIONS**

Exterior

The Liberty Building retains excellent historic integrity in four of its seven aspects. The building's historic integrity in its other three aspects is very good.

Because the Liberty Buildings remains on its original site, the level of integrity as it relates to *location* is excellent.

The integrity of the building as it relates to its *design* is very good. While it is true that the building's original windows have been removed, they were replaced with designs, which reflect the pane configuration original to the building. The building's other exterior features remain virtually unimpaired.

As described above, the Liberty Building is connected to the Des Moines skywalk system. This system consists of a number of pedestrian hallways, situated above the city's streets, which link downtown Des Moines buildings together at the second floor level. The skywalk link to the Liberty Building is attached to the south and west elevations of the edifice. These are secondary facades of and the skywalk does not compromise its integrity of design as a result.

The integrity of the Liberty's *setting* is very good. At the intersection of Sixth and Grand Avenues, the building stands just as it did during the building's period of significance. The Liberty Building now is surrounded on three sides by new commercial buildings in Des Moines' vibrant downtown. All of them are office-like in appearance. An unimproved lot, now used for parking and located diagonally across the street someday will be redeveloped no doubt.

The integrity of the Liberty Building as it relates to *materials* remains very good. While the loss of original windows is regrettable, the design of their metal replacements mimicked their original pane configurations. In all other regards, the integrity of the building's exterior materials remains excellent.

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The terra cotta details used in the main entrance of the building are well modeled, cast, and finished. The condition of the stone facing and terra cotta on the first two floors is in excellent condition, as are the brick curtain walls, stone band between the tenth and 11th floors, and cornice at the top of the building.

The integrity of the building's *workmanship* is excellent as it relates to the building's exterior masonry construction and detailing. The brick, terra cotta, marble, and granite used in the building—particularly as exhibited in the main entrance to the building—are carefully laid in tight-fitting joints with mortar without sign of deterioration, now more than six decades old.

The Liberty Building retains an excellent *feeling* of its historic function. The building's north and east elevations convey a powerful impression of strength and stability, exactly the qualities the insurance company, which originally occupied the building, wished to convey to the public.

The building also retains a high level of integrity as it relates to *association*. Visitors from its period of significance would readily recognize the building's exterior and its surroundings today.

Interior

The interior of the building has undergone considerable change since its original construction and varies from floor to floor. Its integrity ranges from poor to good in five of its aspects and excellent in two of its others.

Its integrity of the building's *location* is excellent, as outlined above.

The integrity of the interior's *design* is difficult to evaluate because historic images of it have not been uncovered. Judging from existing evidence on the walls, ceilings, and floors of the gutted floors, the upper floors were largely undivided open spaces, likely with row-upon-row of desks and filing cabinets. The floor plan in the public space lobbies on each floor remains intact on all twelve floors. Because of the extensive changes the overall integrity of the interior's design is evaluated as poor to fair. It should be noted—also judging from the gutted floors—that, as built, architectural detail on the interior was minimal with an emphasis on efficiency and cost-effectiveness.

The integrity of the building's *setting* is very good. The area's commercial land use remains intact as in the 1920s; and, looking out of their office windows, employees from the past would recognize the soaring bell tower of nearby St. Ambrose Roman Catholic Cathedral immediately.

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The interior's integrity of *materials* is fair. The original plaster perimeter walls and terrazzo floors remain intact in the gutted portions of the building. On its remodeled floors, these surfaces have been mostly covered with other materials. The staircases with their terrazzo floors and metal railings remain intact as originally built.

The integrity of the interior's *workmanship* is good, evident in the smooth plaster surfaces and terrazzo floors in the gutted areas and staircases of the building along with the metal railings in the building's staircases.

The interior retains a good sense of *association*. Employees from its period of significance would immediately recognize the configuration of the main lobby and by recognizable elevators and staircases easily find their way to the floors on which they worked. As mentioned in Section 8, nothing remain intact of radio station WHO's studios on the 11th floor of the building.

The building's public spaces possess an excellent *feeling* of an office building because the elevator lobby and bank of four elevators, running from the basement to the top floor, remain intact on each floor.

**FUTURE PLANS**

In 2007, the Liberty Development Group, L.L.C., the present owners of the building, purchased it. The company's intent is to convert floors four through eight into a hotel and the gutted portion of the first floor into its lobby. Currently, the firm is negotiating with the Hyatt hotel chain as its occupant. The plan calls for the use of federal and state historic preservation tax credits to help fund the project.

Liberty Building  
Name of Property

Polk County, Iowa  
County and State

**8. Statement of Significance**

**Applicable National Register Criteria**

(Mark "x" on one or more lines for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

- A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

**Criteria Considerations**

(Mark "x" on all the lines that apply)

Property is:

- A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** removed from its original location.
- C** a birthplace or grave.
- D** a cemetery.
- E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F** a commemorative property.
- G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

**Areas of Significance**

(Enter categories from instructions)

COMMERCE

ARCHITECTURE

**Period of Significance**

1924-1940

**Significant Dates**

1924

1940

**Significant Person**

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A

**Cultural Affiliation**

**Architect/Builder**

Proudfoot, Bird & Rawson

Benson, John A., Construction Company

**Narrative Statement of Significance** - (Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets)

**9. Major Bibliography References**

**Bibliography**

(Cite the books, articles and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

**Previous documentation on file (NPS):**

- previous determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Record
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_

**Primary location of additional data:**

- State Historical Preservation Office
  - Other State agency
  - Federal agency
  - Local government
  - University
  - Other
- Name of repository \_\_\_\_\_

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**SUMMARY OF SIGNIFICANCE**

Completed and first occupied in 1924, the Liberty Building is locally significant, under National Register Criterion A, because it calls attention to Des Moines as a center of the nation's insurance industry. (Wall: 58; Long 1988: 47-48) Between 1924 and 1940, the Bankers Life Insurance Company occupied five and then six floors in this building as its major tenant. Today, this firm has become The Principal Financial Group, one of the ten largest mutual life insurance companies in America. During its occupancy of the Liberty Building, Bankers Life flourished under the leadership of George Kuhns, its president. Kuhns revolutionized advertising for the company, introducing direct mail and pushing for the establishment WHO Radio Station, which the firm purchased in 1925 and located on the 11th floor of the Liberty Building. By 1940, Bankers Life had outgrown its offices in the Liberty Building and moved into its newly constructed home office on High Street in Des Moines, where it remains to the present day. Following that move, the American Mutual Life Company occupied the Liberty Building as its home office, continuing the building's historic function.

The Liberty Building is locally significant, under National Register Criterion C, because of its architectural design. This 12-story building calls attention to the second era of skyscraper construction in Des Moines and, more particularly, to Proudfoot, Bird & Rawson, the Des Moines-based architectural firm, which by the 1920s had come to dominate new commercial construction in downtown Des Moines. The Liberty Building also calls attention to John A. Benson and the John A. Benson Construction Company, the general contractor for the building.

The period of significance, under Criterion A, is 1924 through 1940, the years the Bankers Life occupied the building. The period of significance, under Criterion C, is 1924, the year the building was completed and put into service. The property contains one resource for this nomination—the edifice itself, which is counted as a building. The Registration Requirements, as outlined in Section F of *The Architectural Legacy of Proudfoot & Bird in Iowa, 1882-1940 MPD*, are satisfied because the exterior of the building retains the integrity of its design.

**BANKERS LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY**

The Liberty Building is historically significant, under National Register Criterion A, because it calls attention to the importance of Des Moines, Iowa, as a national insurance center in the United States. Between 1924 and 1940, the Liberty Building housed the home office of the Bankers Life Insurance Company, the forerunner of today's Principal Mutual Life Insurance Company. This firm today

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stands as the primary member of The Principal Financial Group, one among the ten largest mutual life insurance companies in the nation. Other insurance firms with home offices in the Liberty Building have included the American Mutual Life Company. The insurance industry in Des Moines has had an incalculable effect on the local economy. In 1928, approximately 3,500 employees worked at insurance home offices in the city (City directory: 28) with Bankers Life a leader among them.

Under the leadership of George Kuhns, the president of Bankers Life, that company established WHO Radio Station in 1924 and located its studios in the Liberty Building. Kuhn's intent was for this clear-channel radio station to promote life insurance and advertise the Bankers Life brand. WHO subsequently became a communications staple across the Midwest.

Bankers Life Insurance Company

The Bankers Life Insurance Company was one of the original occupants of the Liberty Building. The firm was founded in 1879 as The Bankers Life Association through the leadership of Edward A. Temple of Chariton, Iowa. Temple envisioned an association of bankers and bank employees, which could provide benefits to families upon the death of an association member. The idea of assessment-based insurance quickly proved popular; and, in 1879, the Bankers Life Association was incorporated. By 1904, the association had \$143 million worth of insurance in force.

The ensuing years brought more challenges to the firm, as the life insurance business developed and grew more complex. The election of George Kuhns (1861-1926) as president of Bankers Life in 1916 reinvigorated the firm. The amount of its insurance in force increased nearly \$50 million from 1918 to 1919 under his presidency and by \$75 million from 1924 to 1925. (Wall: 56) Although the firm's replacement of assessment-based insurance with the more profitable mutual life insurance required longer than Kuhns had anticipated, he substantially increased the number of policyholders under the new plan by means of aggressive advertising and a highly motivated cadre of field agents. As the firm's authorized history reports:

The agents became the folk heroes of the Bankers Life world throughout the twenties and thirties, and the tales told and retold of the more colorful characters became the threads out of which legends are woven. (Wall: 53)

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By 1925, Bankers Life insurance in force had grown to \$844 million. Aggressive advertising played an important role in this growth.

In order to help postwar sales grow, Bankers Life Company stepped up its advertising in the expanding market for insurance; it was a pioneer in the use of direct mail. Another means of promoting the company was the Des Moines radio station WHO, which Bankers Life Company acquired in 1925. The company became identified with the station, which featured several Bankers Life employees as performers and had a clear-channel sign that carried it throughout the Midwest. WHO became a National Broadcasting Company affiliate in 1927, but the next year lost its clear-channel status and had to share the frequency with station WOC of Davenport, Iowa. Both stations protested to the Federal Radio Commission, to no avail, and WHO was sold to WOC in 1930. (Principal Mutual Life Insurance Company: 2)

Beginning in 1924, Bankers Life had housed its home office on the upper six floors of the 12-story edifice, and the events outlined above took place there.

Bankers Mortgage Company, a subsidiary of Bankers Life, was originally charged to spearhead the development of the Liberty Building. Subsequently, the Liberty Building Company was formed to administer its construction. John A. Benson served as its president and E. W. Nothstine as its vice-president. (*Des Moines Sunday Register*, June 18, 1922)

Although the Great Depression affected Bankers Life, as it did to all aspects of American life, by 1938 the company's business had begun recovery. Outgrowing its headquarters in the Liberty Building, Bankers Life broke ground for its new home office at 711 High Street in 1938. With the building completed in 1940, the company relocated from the Liberty Building into its new headquarters.

American Mutual Life Company

In the late 1940s, the American Mutual Life Insurance Company moved into the Liberty Building and based its operations there, where it remained into the early 21st century.

This firm had been established as the Brotherhood of American Yeomen in Bancroft, Iowa, in 1897 as a fraternal organization with a modest life insurance service for its membership. By 1917, the

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organization claimed 300,000 members. Following World War I, this membership began to wane, the organization's administration decided to separate its social programs from its insurance programs, and founded the Yeoman Mutual Insurance Company in 1932. The firm's name changed in 1938 to American Mutual Life. Following World War II, American Mutual Life prospered, fueled by the post-war boom, and relocated their headquarters to the Liberty Building. The firm installed prominent neon signs above the 12th floor of the building on its east and north elevations. Lettered in red, the signs read "American Mutual Life" and stood as a downtown Des Moines landmark until they were removed circa 2005. (See Figure #18.)

**WHO RADIO STATION**

Although the Liberty Building lacks today any trace of its role as broadcasting facility, the building's link with WHO Radio Station is of historical interest.

A staple of the Midwestern household today, WHO began its broadcasting life in 1924 from room 1110 on the 11th floor of the Liberty Building. Using a clear-channel wavelength, this broadcasting service was the creation of the Bankers Life Insurance Company. As late as 1929, WHO remained the only radio station in Des Moines.

George Kuhns, the president of Bankers Life, provided the push to establish this communication pioneer. According to one local newspaper:

Mr. Kuhns, the father of WHO, has been a pioneer radio enthusiast in Des Moines and has operated a receiving set since the beginning of radio broadcasting in the middle west.  
(*Des Moines Register*, April 6, 1924)

Bankers Life sought an elevated social and cultural tone for the radio station, as evident in the performers and musical selections of its debut broadcast. On April 11, 1924, the first program began at 7:30 p.m. The Fortnightly Club, a local assemble of amateur musicians, presented a concert. The musicians included such socially prominent names as Mrs. George Polk Hippee (piano), Mrs. Arthur Neumann, and Mrs. Jefferson Polk. George Kuhns opened the broadcast with an inaugural address and the announcement of a contest,



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with all radio fans as the contestants and four receiving [radio] sets as the prizes to be given away by the Bankers Life. . . Any person receiving the concert may send a postal card or letter under date of April 29, telling how the number was received and the name of the artist. . . On May 8, four names will be selected by little Betsy Heinz, two and a half years old. One will go to the city of Des Moines, one for the state of Iowa outside of Des Moines, one to the United States outside of Iowa, and one for foreign countries, including the dependencies of the United States. (*Des Moines Capital*, April 11, 1924)

In this fashion, Bankers Life collected information about the quality of its signal and the extent of its broadcast area. "Little Betsy" was the daughter of W. H. Heinz, a graduate of the University of Pittsburgh with a degree in mechanical engineering, WHO's manager at the time, and the owner of The Heinz Radio Co. Little Betsy was George Kuhns' granddaughter. (Wall: 59) To celebrate this debut, Heinz mounted one of his firm's radio sets at the Princess Theatre in downtown Des Moines and, before the start of the theater's regular performance, broadcast the inaugural concert to the audience. (*Des Moines Register*, April 11, 1924)

The call letters for WHO provided a catchy station identification slogan, as announcers voiced over the air:

"This is WHO—WHO?—Bankers Life, Des Moines, Iowa." WHO quickly became the most famous call letters throughout the Midwest, and Bankers Life was securely tied to that fame. (Wall: 60)

Following Kuhns' death in 1926, Bankers Life sold WHO to the Central Broadcasting Corporation in 1930. Then, in 1932, the new owner relocated the radio station from the Liberty Building to 914 Walnut Street in Des Moines. (City directory 1932, 1933: 898, 810) Of historical interest in this regard, future President Ronald Reagan served as a radio sportscaster for WHO Radio Station between 1934 and 1937 at its new location. WHO continues to broadcast to the present day from call signal 1040 AM.

Other radio stations in Des Moines historically broadcasted from studios high up in downtown skyscrapers. In 1938, for example radio stations KRNT and KSO broadcast from the 13th floor of the Register & Tribune Building at 715 Locust Street. (City directory: 1256)

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**ARCHITECTURE**

The Liberty Building is architecturally significant because of its skyscraper design and associations with the Des Moines architectural firm of Proudfoot, Bird & Rawson. The Liberty Building calls attention to the second era of skyscraper construction in downtown Des Moines during the 1920s (Page 2004: 26-27) and to Proudfoot, Bird & Rawson's manipulation of classical styling in a contemporary vein. The block-like appearance of the building conveys the feeling of impregnable strength, exactly the image an insurance company wishes to impart.

Skyscraper

For the purpose of this nomination, "skyscraper" is defined as a 10-story or taller building. This double-digit number appears to have served historically as a threshold for this architectural form during its advent in Des Moines. (Page 2004: 26)) Other localities may have defined the word in other ways, including East Des Moines, where the 6-story Teachout Building has been thus described. (Cackler)

As the following table shows, two eras of skyscraper construction occurred in Des Moines prior to World War II. The first era dates from the late 19th century through circa 1915. World War I curtailed further construction. Then, in the prosperous 1920s, skyscraper construction resumed.

**SKYSCRAPER OFFICE BUILDINGS IN DES MOINES BEFORE 1945**

<u>Name</u>	<u>Address</u>	<u>Notes and Construction Date</u>
Equitable Life Assurance Building (nonextant)	6 <sup>th</sup> & Locust St.	8 story, 1891; 4 stories added, 1911
Observatory Building (nonextant)	402 Locust St.	9 story + 5 story tower, 1896
Fleming Building (NRHP)	604 Walnut St.	10 story, 1907
Hubbell Building (NRHP)	904 Walnut St.	10 story, 1913
Hippee Building	6 <sup>th</sup> Avenue, n.w.cor. Mulberry	12 story, 1913

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**SKYSCRAPER OFFICE BUILDINGS IN DES MOINES BEFORE 1945 (continued)**

Name	Notes and Address	Construction Date
Des Moines Register Building	715 Locust St.	13 story, 1913-1915
Insurance Exchange Building	421 Grand Ave.	10-story 1923
Equitable Life Insurance Co. of Iowa Bldg.	604 Locust St.	18 story, 1923
Liberty Building	418 6 <sup>th</sup> Ave.	12 story, 1924
Northwestern Bell Telephone Building	604 9 <sup>th</sup> St.	10-story, 1929
Des Moines Building	405 6 <sup>th</sup> Ave.	14 story, c. 1931

Some might add the 6-story Teachout Building (NRHP, 500 East Locust Street, built in 1912) to this list of skyscrapers; and, perhaps within the context of East Des Moines, this might be justified. (Cackler) Still, for downtown Des Moines proper, buildings with double-digit stories formed the threshold for the skyscraper moniker.

The advent of skyscrapers to Des Moines altered the city's skyline. Previous to their appearance, the Iowa State Capitol had dominated the city. Located at the top of a hill above the downtown, the capitol's dome soared above the city's central business district, which clustered at its foot in the flood plain of the Des Moines and Raccoon River valleys. By the 1920s—with a host of office and hotel skyscrapers rising above the flood plain—downtown Des Moines possessed a commercial skyline like other modern American cities.

This table clearly places the Liberty Building within the era of post-World War I skyscrapers in Des Moines. When the effects of the Great Depression took hold in Des Moines, new skyscraper construction ceased. When downtown construction resumed later in the 1930s, new office buildings did not aspire to skyscraper status. The new Bankers Life building at 711 High Street (completed in 1940), for example, possessed eight stories.

A third era of skyscraper construction began in Des Moines in the fourth quarter of the 20th century, but this era is beyond the period of significance of this nomination.

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The Liberty Building shows how Proudfoot, Bird & Rawson took the Chicago skyscraper—with its elements of base, shaft, and cornice—applied a minimum of classically-influenced detailing to its exterior, and achieved a forward-looking design as a result.

By the 1920s, the Des Moines architectural firm of Proudfoot & Bird and its successor partnerships became “Iowa’s Pre-Eminent Architectural Firm.” (Long 1981) The firm’s notable designs in Des Moines included the Polk County Courthouse, First Methodist Episcopal Church, Iowa-Des Moines National Bank, Masonic Temple, Drake University Stadium and Fieldhouse, and Roosevelt and East High Schools, among many others. A list of the firm’s skyscrapers follows:

PROUDFOOT & BIRD, *ET AL.* SKYSCRAPERS IN DES MOINES

<u>Property</u>	<u>Firm</u>	<u>Date</u>
Bankers Trust Company Building*	Proudfoot, Bird & Rawson	1891
Hubbell Building (NRHP)	Proudfoot, Bird & Rawson	1913
Des Moines Register Building	Proudfoot, Bird & Rawson	1915
Hotel Fort Des Moines (NRHP)	Proudfoot, Bird & Rawson	1919
Equitable Life Insurance Co. of Iowa Bldg.	Proudfoot, Bird & Rawson	1923
Liberty Building	Proudfoot, Bird & Rawson	1922
Iowa-Des Moines National Bank# (NRHP)	Proudfoot, Rawson, Souers & Thomas	1930-1932
Des Moines Building	Proudfoot, Rawson, Brooks & Borg	c. 1939

\* Nonextant. Originally designed by Andrews, Jacques & Rantoul and built in 1891 as an 8-story building. The top four floors, designed by Proudfoot, Bird & Rawson, were added in 1911

# Built in 1930-1932 as a 3-story building but designed and constructed with the structural capability to support a skyscraper. The top stories remain unimplemented.

A comparison of this table with the table, which precedes it, demonstrates the dominance of the Proudfoot-Bird firm in designing Des Moines’ skyscrapers.

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Within this context, the Liberty Building reaffirms the firm's skill at designing a skyscraper influenced by Classical Revival styling while reducing its elements and detailing to a minimum. The deep terra cotta cornices and belt courses of contrasting color capping the Hubbell Building, Des Moines Register Building, and Hotel Fort Des Moines (the firm's earlier classically-influenced skyscrapers) have disappeared, replaced in the Liberty Building by a simple and low-profile cornice held tightly to the plane of the elevation. Although the design of the Liberty Building acknowledges the base, shaft, and cornice formula of Chicago School skyscrapers, its design de-emphasizing these spatial relationships by its smooth surfaces, low-profiled detailing, and use of essentially monochromatic building materials.

As architectural historian Patricia A. Eckhardt has written:

This is a transitional building in style. It has classical details, but the over all composition is abstract and geometry is emphasized. The building appears to be a hollow cube with the windows cut out. Only upon closer inspection do you see the classical details. (Eckhardt, Liberty Building Iowa Site Inventory Form: 1)

As a result, the Liberty Building projects the feeling of a powerful stronghold—exactly the image of security an insurance company wishes to convey to the public.

John A. Benson and the John A. Benson Construction Co.

John A. Benson exemplified the American Dream. Born in Sweden, Benson emigrated to Des Moines in 1882, where he learned the brick mason's trade. Benson's skill as a builder, business sense, and ambition propelled his career; and, by the early 20th century, Benson had become a premier general contractor in Des Moines and president of the firm of John A. Benson Construction Co. Benson had earlier partnered in the contracting firm of Benson & Marxer.

Benson's business flourished. In 1911, his firm built the new East High School at 813 East 13th Street in Des Moines, "without doubt the largest, costliest and most imposing high school building in Iowa," according to one contemporary historian. (Brigham: I-422) Benson's membership in the local First Lutheran Church made him the obvious candidate as the general contractor for Iowa Lutheran Hospital in 1914, an institution founded in 1910 by the church. When the hospital's board of directors could not decide on the color of brick for the new building, the board let Benson decide.

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(Page 2005: 48) Benson's choice of creamy yellow-colored brick for the building established a precedent, which continues to affect construction at the hospital to the present day.

The Liberty Building is likely Benson's greatest achievement as a general contractor. At a cost of some \$1 million, the 12-story Liberty Building added a new profile to downtown Des Moines' skyline, rivaling in height and scale the city's skyscrapers erected by Benson's competitors.

The Liberty Building is also likely Benson's greatest achievement as an executive. The idea for the building had originated as a subsidiary venture of the Bankers Mortgage Company, E. W. Nothstine having launched the project. (*Des Moines Register*, November 30, 1922). To develop the property, the Liberty Building Company was formed with John A. Benson as its president and Nothstine as its vice-president. (*Ibid.*: June 18, 1922) In his role as head of the Liberty Building Company and its success as an enterprise, Benson demonstrated his considerable skill in business administration.

The selection of Proudfoot, Bird & Rawson to design the Liberty Building came as no surprise. John A. Benson had worked with that firm for more than a decade, including the construction of its designs for East High School and Iowa Lutheran Hospital. As president of the Liberty Building Company, Benson no doubt played an influential role in selecting the architect for that building. His long-standing relationship with Proudfoot, Bird & Rawson made that choice natural. No doubt Benson also influenced the new skyscraper's design. The choice of tan brick for the Liberty Building points to Benson's preference for light-colored building materials, as seen at Iowa Lutheran Hospital, for example.

**REPRESENTATION IN OTHER CULTURAL RESOURCES SURVEYS**

Professionals are in agreement that the Liberty Building is National Register eligible.

Barbara Beving Long's *Iowa's Pre-Eminent Architectural Firm: the Architectural Legacy of Proudfoot and Bird, et al, in Iowa* surveyed that firm's work in Iowa. In that report, she mentions the firm's use of Classical Revival styling in several downtown Des Moines office buildings but does not mention the Liberty Building by name.

In 1983, Long completed an Iowa Site Inventory Form for the Liberty Building. In it, she found the Liberty Building National Register eligible under Criterion A and wrote:

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The presence of numerous home offices of insurance companies has contributed significantly to Des Moines' growth and prosperity. By the 1920s Des Moines was the most important insurance center in the West, having 43 home offices and total assets of over \$400 million. They employed nearly 5,000 people.

The Liberty Building is directly associated with two life insurance companies in Des Moines, the Bankers Life Company (1924-1940) and American Mutual Life Insurance Company (1940-present). Few early insurance offices are extant.

For a discussion of American Mutual (Brotherhood of American Yeoman), see William Koch House. For a discussion of the Bankers Life, see Edward Temple House, Joseph F. Wall, *Policies and People. The First Hundred Years of Bankers Life*, (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1979), p. 58. (Long 1983)

In 1995, Patricia A. Eckhardt conducted a reconnaissance survey of downtown Des Moines, prepared an historic context for the area, and completed a series of Iowa Site Inventory Forms. The Liberty Building was included among these surveyed resources and given the Iowa Site Inventory Number 77-02992. Eckhardt's survey found the Liberty Building National Register eligible under Criteria A, B, and C. Edward A. Temple was identified as a significant person under Criterion B. (Eckhardt: Liberty Building Iowa Site Inventory Form)

#### **POTENTIAL FOR HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY**

Although the site's potential for archaeological research is, as yet, unevaluated, there appears to be little in this regard. Excavation for the construction of this building in 1924 disturbed the entire site.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH AND REGISTRATION**

The rise of the skyscraper in the State of Iowa deserves further research. As architectural historians flesh out this subject, this information should be used to re-evaluate the design of the Liberty Building and its role within this statewide context.

Although John A. Benson and the John A. Benson Construction Company contributed significantly to the built environment of Des Moines and central Iowa during the early 20th century, little research has documented Benson and his company to date. These topics deserve further investigation.

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Liberty Building, Polk County, Iowa.

Scandinavian immigrants to Des Moines, like Benson, established several of the city's biggest construction firms, and this historic context begs for development.

During the early 20th century, the radio offered American businesses a new marketing tool. In addition to Bankers Life, as discussed in this nomination, the Nashville Life and Accident Insurance Company of Nashville, Tennessee, established in 1925 radio station WSM for this purpose. (Adams and Christian: 117) Other examples of this phenomenon are likely, and this topic deserves further research and development.



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Liberty Building, Polk County, Iowa.

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Liberty Building, Polk County, Iowa.

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Liberty Building  
Name of Property

Polk County, Iowa  
County and State

### 10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property Less than one acre

#### UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1 | 15 | 4 479 00 | 460 3 960 |  
Zone Easting Northing

2 |    |             |          |  
Zone Easting Northing

3 |    |             |          |  
Zone Easting Northing

4 |    |             |          |

#### Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet)

#### Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet)

### 11. Form Prepared By

name/title William C. Page, Public Historian  
organization Liberty Building Development Group, L.L.C. date July 10, 2009  
street & number 520 East Sheridan Avenue (Page) telephone 515-243-5740 (Page)  
city or town Des Moines state Iowa zip code 50313-5017

### Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

#### Continuation Sheets

#### Maps

A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

**Photographs** - Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

**Additional items** - (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

### Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO.)

name See Continuation Sheet  
street & number \_\_\_\_\_ telephone \_\_\_\_\_  
city or town \_\_\_\_\_ state Iowa zip code \_\_\_\_\_

**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

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**VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION**

Lots 7 and 8 in Commissioner's Addition to the City of Des Moines.

**BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION**

The National Register boundary contains all land historically associated with this resource.

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Liberty Building, Polk County, Iowa.

**LIST OF PHOTOGRAPHS**

1. Liberty Building  
418 Sixth Avenue  
Des Moines, IA 50309  
Looking southwest  
William C. Page, Photographer  
July 13, 2009
2. Liberty Building  
418 Sixth Avenue  
Des Moines, IA 50309  
Looking southeast  
William C. Page, Photographer  
July 13, 2009
3. Liberty Building  
418 Sixth Avenue  
Des Moines, IA 50309  
Looking northwest  
William C. Page, Photographer  
July 13, 2009
4. Liberty Building  
418 Sixth Avenue  
Des Moines, IA 50309  
Looking northeast to triangular extension surmounted by elevator house  
William C. Page, Photographer  
July 13, 2009
5. Liberty Building  
418 Sixth Avenue  
Des Moines, IA 50309  
Looking southeast  
William C. Page, Photographer  
July 13, 2009
6. Liberty Building  
418 Sixth Avenue  
Des Moines, IA 50309  
Detail of main entrance looking west  
William C. Page, Photographer  
July 13, 2009

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7. Liberty Building  
418 Sixth Avenue  
Des Moines, IA 50309  
Interior detail of 1st floor lobby looking southwest  
William C. Page, Photographer  
July 13, 2009
8. Liberty Building  
418 Sixth Avenue  
Des Moines, IA 50309  
Interior detail of 4th floor looking west  
William C. Page, Photographer  
July 13, 2009
9. Liberty Building  
418 Sixth Avenue  
Des Moines, IA 50309  
Interior detail of 6th floor looking west  
William C. Page, Photographer  
July 13, 2009
10. Liberty Building  
418 Sixth Avenue  
Des Moines, IA 50309  
Interior detail of 12th floor looking southeast  
William C. Page, Photographer  
July 13, 2009

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**PROPERTY OWNER (CONTINUED)**

418 6th Avenue Unit 201  
Liberty Development Group, L.L.C.  
1045 76th Street, Suite 200  
West Des Moines, IA 50266

418 6th Avenue Unit 801  
Liberty Development Group, L.L.C.  
1045 76th Street, Suite 200  
West Des Moines, IA 50266

418 6th Avenue Unit 802  
Liberty Development Group, L.L.C.  
1045 76th Street, Suite 200  
West Des Moines, IA 50266

418 6th Avenue Unit 803  
Liberty Development Group, L.L.C.  
1045 76th Street, Suite 200  
West Des Moines, IA 50266

418 6th Avenue Unit 804  
Liberty Development Group, L.L.C.  
1045 76th Street, Suite 200  
West Des Moines, IA 50266

418 6th Avenue Unit 805  
Liberty Development Group, L.L.C.  
1045 76th Street, Suite 200  
West Des Moines, IA 50266

418 6th Avenue Unit 901  
Liberty Development Group, L.L.C.  
1045 76th Street, Suite 200  
West Des Moines, IA 50266

418 6th Avenue Unit 902  
Larry A. Bradshaw  
418 6th Avenue  
Des Moines, IA 50309



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National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES**  
**CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section number 11 Page 28

CFN-259-1116

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Liberty Building, Polk County, Iowa.

418 6th Avenue Unit 903  
Thomas T. Tarbox  
418 6th Avenue  
Des Moines, IA 50309

418 6th Avenue Unit 904  
Liberty Development Group, L.L.C.  
1045 76th Street, Suite 200  
West Des Moines, IA 50266

418 6th Avenue Unit 905  
Liberty Development Group, L.L.C.  
1045 76th Street, Suite 200  
West Des Moines, IA 50266

418 6th Avenue Unit 1001  
Liberty Development Group, L.L.C.  
1045 76th Street, Suite 200  
West Des Moines, IA 50266

418 6th Avenue Unit 1002  
Liberty Development Group, L.L.C.  
1045 76th Street, Suite 200  
West Des Moines, IA 50266

418 6th Avenue Unit 1003  
Liberty Development Group, L.L.C.  
1045 76th Street, Suite 200  
West Des Moines, IA 50266

418 6th Avenue Unit 1005  
Liberty Development Group, L.L.C.  
1045 76th Street, Suite 200  
West Des Moines, IA 50266

418 6th Avenue Unit 1101  
Liberty Development Group, L.L.C.  
1045 76th Street, Suite 200  
West Des Moines, IA 50266

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES**  
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Liberty Building, Polk County, Iowa.

418 6th Avenue Unit 1102  
Liberty Development Group, L.L.C.  
1045 76th Street, Suite 200  
West Des Moines, IA 50266

418 6th Avenue Unit 1103  
Perry Wehrle (Trustee)  
4401 V18 Road  
Montezuma, IA 50171-8440

418 6th Avenue Unit 1104  
Liberty Development Group, L.L.C.  
1045 76th Street, Suite 200  
West Des Moines, IA 50266

418 Sixth Avenue Unit 1105  
Brooke Avila  
418 Sixth Avenue  
Des Moines, IA 50309-2407

418 Sixth Avenue Unit 1106  
Dustin Vandehoef  
418 Sixth Avenue  
Des Moines, IA 50309-2435

418 6th Avenue Unit 1201  
Liberty Development Group, L.L.C.  
1045 76th Street, Suite 200  
West Des Moines, IA 50266

418 6th Avenue Unit 301  
Liberty Development Group, L.L.C.  
1045 76th Street, Suite 200  
West Des Moines, IA 50266

418 6th Avenue  
Units 401, 402, 403, 404, 405, and 406  
Liberty Development Group, L.L.C.  
1045 76th Street, Suite 200  
West Des Moines, IA 50266

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES**  
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Liberty Building, Polk County, Iowa.

418 6th Avenue  
Units 401, 402, 403, 404, 405, and 406  
Liberty Development Group, L.L.C.  
1045 76th Street, Suite 200  
West Des Moines, IA 50266

418 6th Avenue  
Units 501, 502, 503, 504, 505, and 506  
Liberty Development Group, L.L.C.  
1045 76th Street, Suite 200  
West Des Moines, IA 50266

418 6th Avenue  
Units 601, 602, 603, 604, 605, and 606  
Liberty Development Group, L.L.C.  
1045 76th Street, Suite 200  
West Des Moines, IA 50266

418 6th Avenue  
Units 701, 702, 703, 704, 705, and 706  
Liberty Development Group, L.L.C.  
1045 76th Street, Suite 200  
West Des Moines, IA 50266

418 6th Avenue Suite 1004  
Renae L. Bandstra  
418 Sixth Avenue Suite 1004  
Des Moines, IA 50309-2434

418 Sixth Avenue Unit 101  
Liberty Development Group, L.L.C.  
1045 76th Street, Suite 200  
West Des Moines, IA 50266

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES CONTINUATION SHEET

Section number \_\_\_\_\_ Embedded Images \_\_\_\_\_ Page 31

CFN-259-1116

Liberty Building, Polk County, Iowa.

## LOCATION

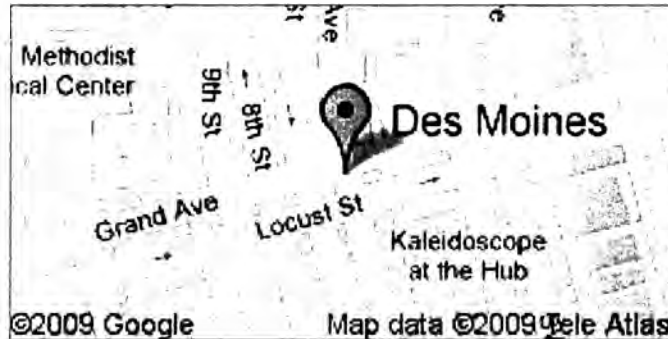


Figure #1

Arrow locates the Liberty Building on the southwest corner of Sixth and Grand Avenues.

Source: Google Earth, viewed September 21, 2009.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

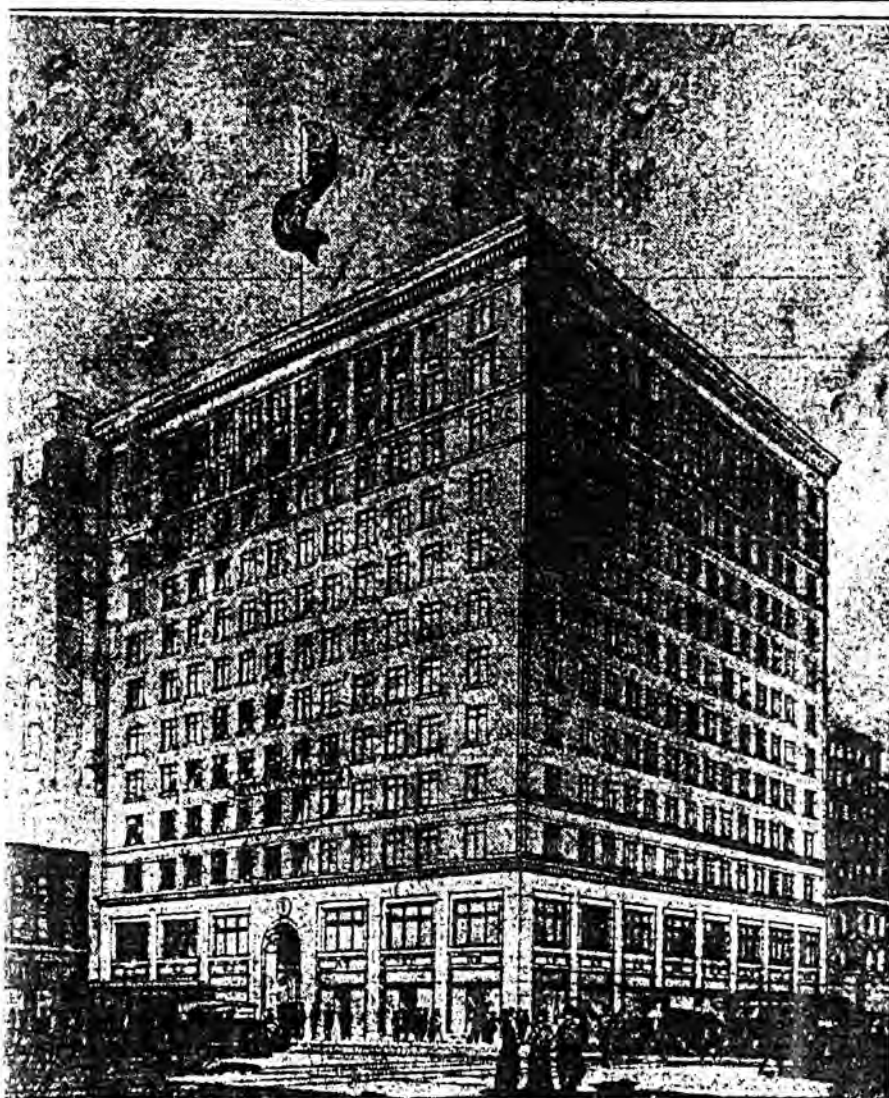
# NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES CONTINUATION SHEET

Section number \_\_\_\_\_ Embedded Images \_\_\_\_\_ Page 32

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Liberty Building, Polk County, Iowa.

## Building to Be Erected at Sixth and Grand



This architect's drawing of the yet unnamed Liberty Building appeared in November 1922. The building was complete and open for business in April 1924. It was built very much as pictured here although twin aerial towers for WHO Radio Station were installed instead of the flagpole.

Figure #2

Source: *Des Moines Register*, November 30, 1922.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES CONTINUATION SHEET

Section number \_\_\_\_\_ Embedded Images \_\_\_\_\_ Page 33

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Liberty Building, Polk County, Iowa.

## LIBERTY BUILDING UNDER CONSTRUCTION



### The New Liberty Building

*Southwest Corner Sixth and Grand Avenue*

Completed and ready for occupancy  
February 1st, 1921

**T**HE NEW Liberty Building, designed by the architect, J. A. Benson, and built by the John A. Benson Construction Company, is a fine example of modern architecture. The building is a ten-story structure, with a total height of 100 feet. It is located at the southwest corner of Sixth and Grand Avenues. The building was completed and ready for occupancy on February 1st, 1921.

The John A. Benson Construction Company is the general contractor for this building.

For more information, contact the John A. Benson Construction Company, 1000 Grand Avenue, Des Moines, Iowa.

Figure #3

This newspaper advertisement identifies the John A. Benson Construction Company as the general contractor for this building.

Source: *Des Moines Register*, September 30, 1923.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES**  
**CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section number \_\_\_\_\_ Embedded Images \_\_\_\_\_ Page 34

CFN-259-1116

Liberty Building, Polk County, Iowa.

**LIBERTY BUILDING CIRCA 1940**



Figure #4

Source: Joseph Frazier Wall, between pp. 52 and 53.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

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Section number \_\_\_\_\_ Embedded Images \_\_\_\_\_ Page 35

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Liberty Building, Polk County, Iowa.

## ARCHITECT DRAWING EAST FACADE 1923

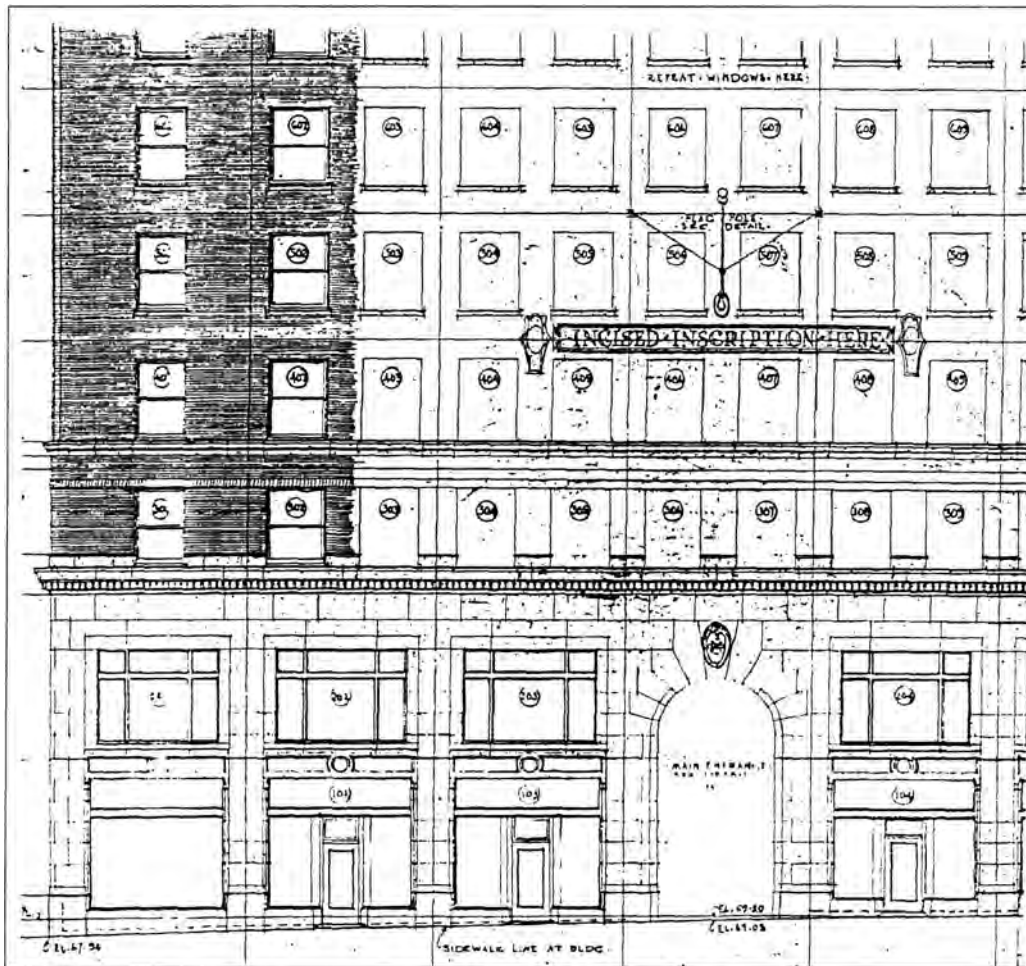


Figure #5

The contrast between the brick curtain walls and the terra cotta on the first and second floors is less apparent than conveyed in this drawing because these materials are essentially monochromatic.

Source: Brooks Borg Skiles Architects Engineers, Des Moines, IA.



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES CONTINUATION SHEET

Section number \_\_\_\_\_ Embedded Images \_\_\_\_\_ Page 36

CFN-259-1116

Liberty Building, Polk County, Iowa.

## ARCHITECT DRAWING MAIN ENTRANCE 1923

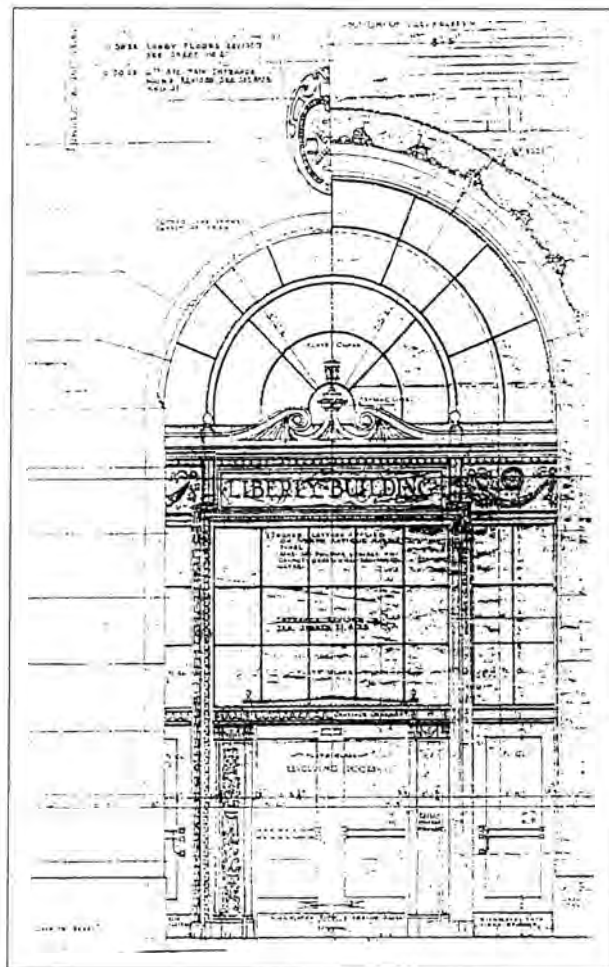


Figure #6

The main entrance to the Liberty Building is on its east elevation and features its most detailed features.

Source: Brooks Borg Skiles Architects Engineers, Des Moines, IA.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES**  
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Section number \_\_\_\_\_ Embedded Images \_\_\_\_\_ Page 37

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Liberty Building, Polk County, Iowa.

**FOOTPRINT OF BUILDING**

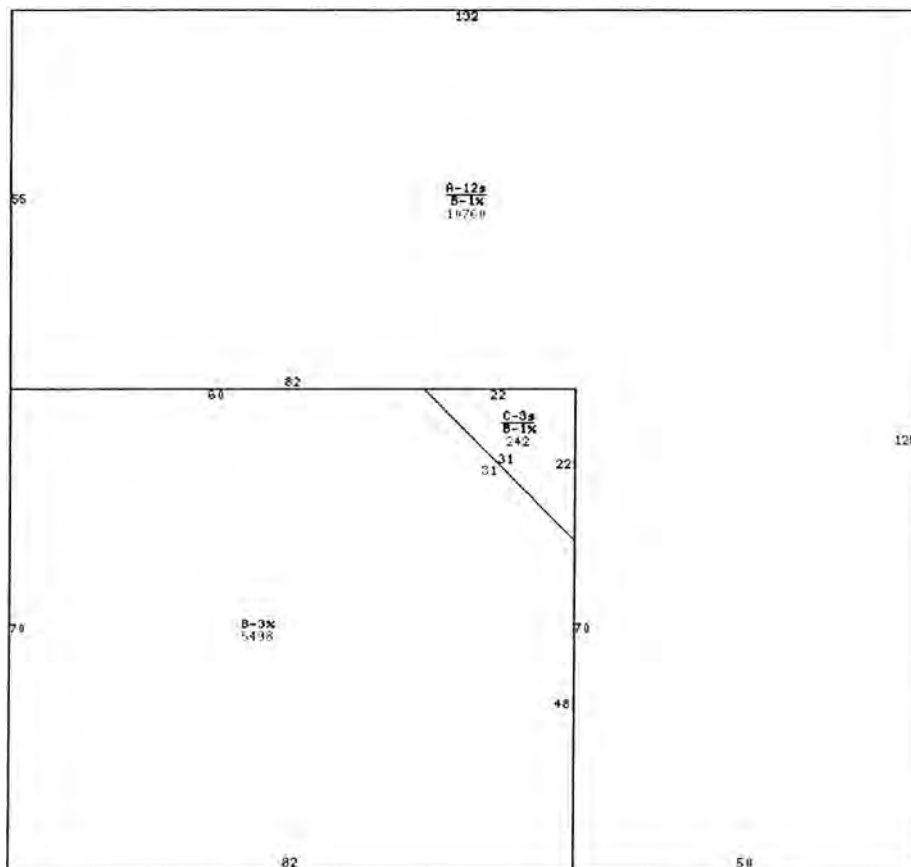


Figure #7



This drawing pictures the 2-story portion of the building in the lower left hand corner and the building's triangularly shaped extension on its 12th floor, which only occurs there.

Source: Polk County Assessor's Office, 2009.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET

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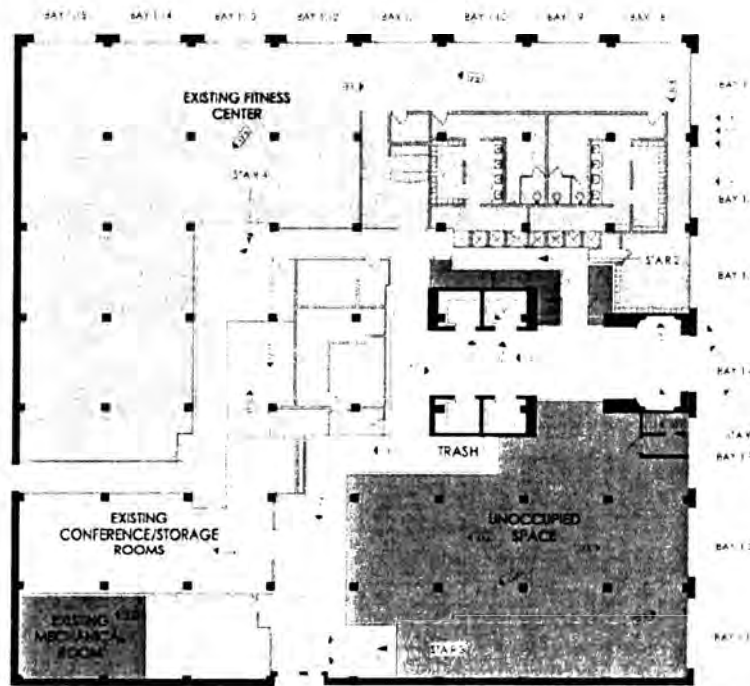
CFN-259-1116

Liberty Building, Polk County, Iowa.

# EXISTING 1ST FLOOR PLAN

### SURVEY LEGEND

- BOUNDARY
- PHOTO FACILITATED CONDITION
- ORIGINAL (EXTERIOR COLUMN)
- ORIGINAL WALL (NON-VISIBLE)



Existing 1st Floor Plan  
SCALE: 1/16" = 1'-0"

Liberty Building - Part 1 State Application  
 Enter dates here  
 Nelson Development  
 Existing Floor  
 A.3

Figure #8

The commercial office space in the lower right-hand corner was gutted in 2005 and remains in that condition to the present day.

Source: G. E. Wattier Architecture, Inc., 2009.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

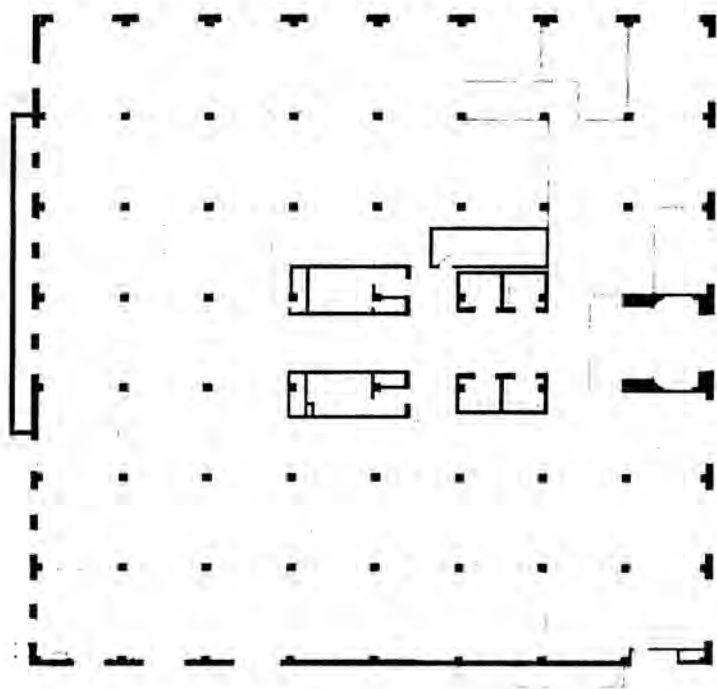
# NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES CONTINUATION SHEET

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Liberty Building, Polk County, Iowa.

## EXISTING 2ND FLOOR PLAN



1 Existing 2nd Floor Plan  
A.4 SCALE: 1/16" = 1'-0"



Section  
Existing Floor 2  
A.4

Liberty Building, Polk County, Iowa  
418 5th Avenue, Des Moines, Iowa  
Nelson Development



Figure #9

Source: G. E. Wattier Architecture, Inc., 2009.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

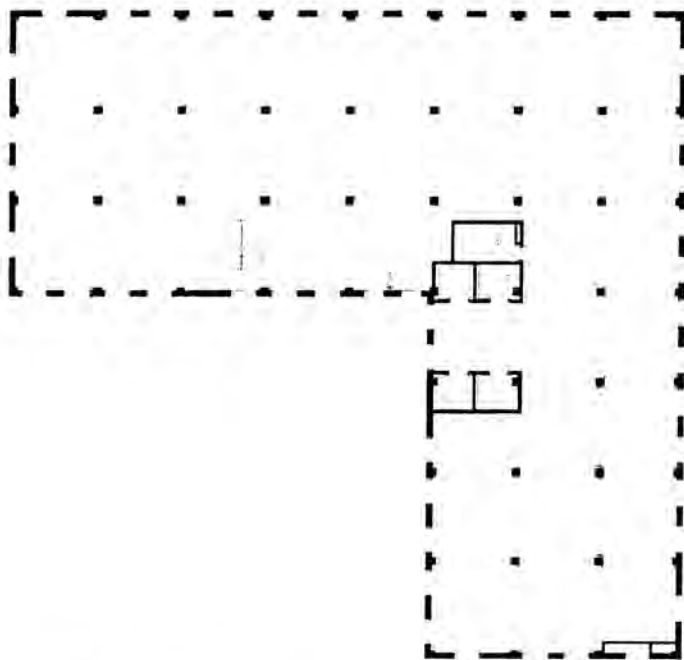
# NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES CONTINUATION SHEET

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Liberty Building, Polk County, Iowa.

## EXISTING 3RD FLOOR PLAN



Existing 3rd Floor Plan  
A.5 SCALE: 7/16" = 1'-0"



LIBERTY BUILDING PART II FEDERAL APPLICATION  
418 21/4 AVENUE DES MOINES, IOWA  
NELSON DEVELOPMENT  
EXISTING FLOOR 3  
A.5

Figure #10

Source: G. E. Wattier Architecture, Inc., 2009.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES CONTINUATION SHEET

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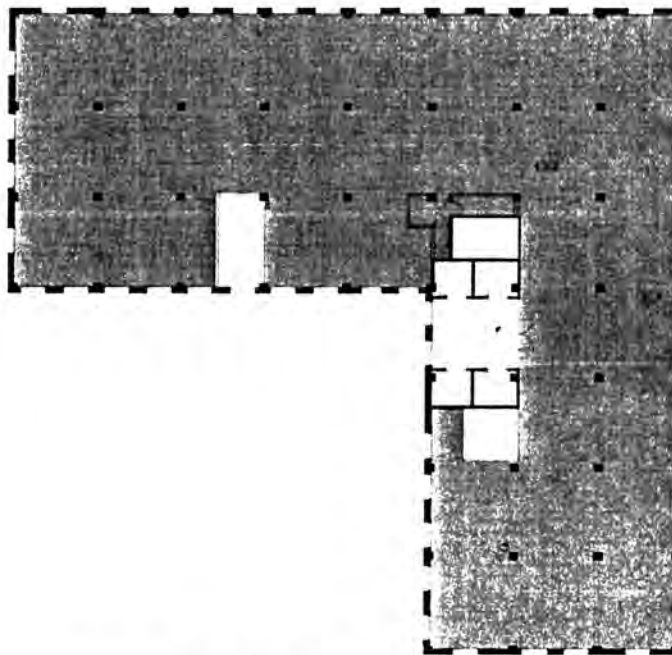
CFN-259-1116

Liberty Building, Polk County, Iowa.

## EXISTING 4TH THROUGH 7TH FLOOR PLAN

### SURVEY LEGEND

- BOUNDARY
- PHOTOGRAPHIC EVIDENCE LOCATION
- ORIGINAL 1924 WALL/CEILING
- ORIGINAL WALL/DOOR STOPS



Existing 4th,5th,6th,7th Floor Plan  
A.6 SCALE: 1/16" = 1'-0"

Liberty Building - Part 1 State Application  
Enter address here  
Nelson Development

Existing Floors 4,5,6,7  
A.6

Figure #11

This drawing pictures the existing conditions on floors four through seven. These floors were gutted in 2005 along with floors 9 through 11. The latter floors were rehabilitated as condominiums in 2005. Floors four through eight remain in their gutted state to the present day without any partition walls except where indicated.

Source: G. E. Wattier Architecture, Inc., 2009.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

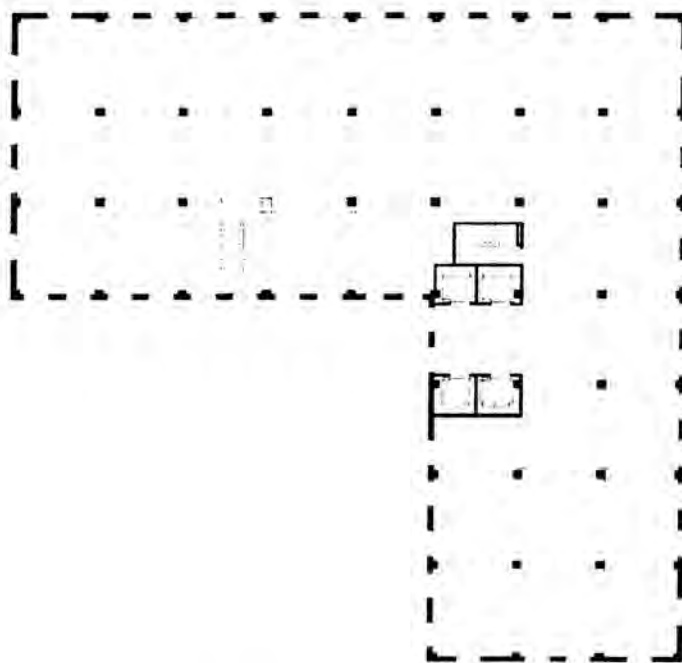
# NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES CONTINUATION SHEET

Section number            Embedded Images            Page 42

CFN-259-1116

Liberty Building, Polk County, Iowa.

## EXISTING 8TH FLOOR PLAN



1 Existing 8th Floor Plan  
PK.7 SCALE: 1/8" = 1'-0"



Figure #12

This drawing pictures the existing conditions on the eighth floor. This floor was gutted in 2005 along with floors 4-7 and 9 through 11. The intent was convert the eighth floor into condominiums, but only wall framing was actually implemented.

Source: G. E. Wattier Architecture, Inc., 2009.

PHOTO  
KEY &  
WINDOW  
SURVEY

MA 02970  
Building floor 8  
11-5-12-2011

Liberty Building - Part II Federal Application  
518 6th Avenue Des Moines, Iowa  
Liberty Development Group

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

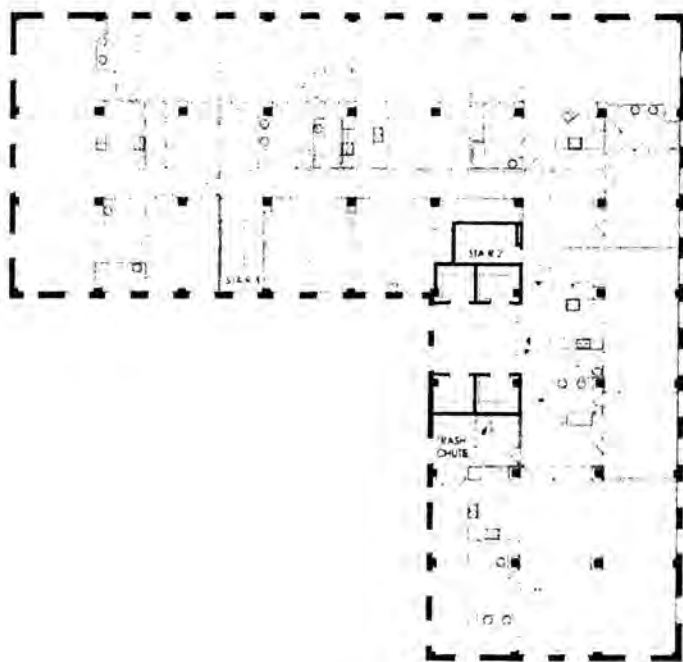
# NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES CONTINUATION SHEET

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CFN-259-1116

Liberty Building, Polk County, Iowa.

## EXISTING 9TH AND 10TH FLOOR PLAN



1 Existing 9th and 10th Floor Plan  
A.B SCALE: 1/16" = 1'-0"



Figure #13

This drawing pictures the existing conditions on the ninth and tenth floors, rehabilitated as condominiums in 2005.

Source: G. E. Wattier Architecture, Inc., 2009.

10/11/09  
Existing Floors 9 and 10  
A.B

Liberty Building, Part II Federal Application  
418 6th Avenue Des Moines, Iowa  
Nelson Development



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

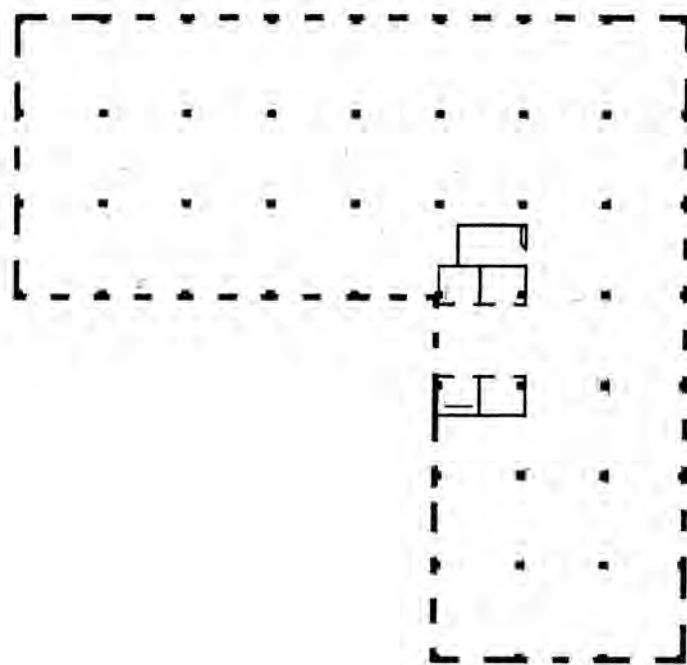
# NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES CONTINUATION SHEET

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CFN-259-1116

Liberty Building, Polk County, Iowa.

## EXISTING 11TH FLOOR PLAN



Existing 11th Floor Plan  
SCALE 1/16" = 1'



PHOTO  
KEY &  
WINDOW  
SURVEY

Existing Floor 11  
11/15/2009

Liberty Building - Part I Federal Application  
418 6th Avenue Des Moines, Iowa  
Liberty Development Group

Figure #14

This drawing pictures the existing conditions on the eleventh floor.  
This floor was gutted in 2005 and rehabilitated as condominiums.

Source: G. E. Wattier Architecture, Inc., 2009.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

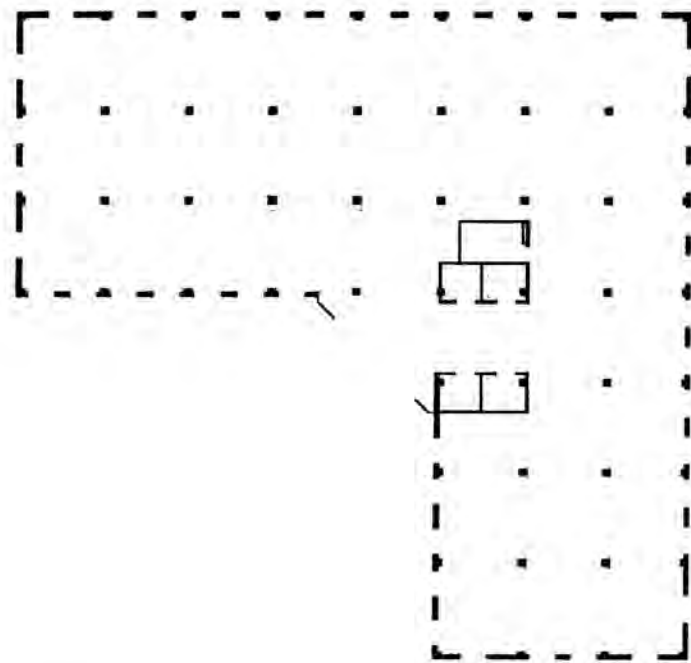
# NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES CONTINUATION SHEET

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CFN-259-1116

Liberty Building, Polk County, Iowa.

## EXISTING 12TH FLOOR PLAN



Existing 12th Floor  
A.10 SCALE 1/16" = 1'-0"



Figure #15

The design of the 12th floor dates from the 1980s.

Source: G. E. Wattier Architecture, Inc., 2009.

Liberty Building Part II Federal Acquisition  
1186th Avenue Des Moines, Iowa  
Nelson Development  
A.10

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES CONTINUATION SHEET

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Liberty Building, Polk County, Iowa.

### READY TO BROADCAST

1924



Figure #16

With twin 115-foot radio towers on the southeast and northwest corners of the Liberty Building, Station WHO broadcast its first program in 1924 from its studios on the skyscraper's 11th floor. The towers were likely removed in the early 1930s, when the station relocated its studios.

Source: *Des Moines Tribune*, April 5, 1924.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES CONTINUATION SHEET

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Liberty Building, Polk County, Iowa.

# RADIO

## Broadcasting Station W H O

### Wave Length 526 Meters

Will go on the air with its first program at 7:30 P.M. (Standard Central Time) Friday, April 11. President Geo. Kuhns of the BankersLifeCompany will make important announcements.

The Fortnightly Club of Des Moines will present a musical program of highest merit.

*W. H. Heinz, Mgr. Holmes Cowper, Musical Director*

## BANKERS LIFE CO.

*Est. 1879*

*Geo. Kuhns, Pres*



Figure #17

Station WHO was the creation of the Bankers Life Co., which helped pioneer radio broadcasting in the Midwest, using this new communications technology to bring the company's name to the attention of the American public.

Source: *Des Moines Tribune*, April 11, 1924 (left); Joseph Frazier Wall, between pp. 52 and 53 (right).

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES CONTINUATION SHEET

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Liberty Building, Polk County, Iowa.

### LIBERTY BUILDING AT NIGHT

CIRCA 1988

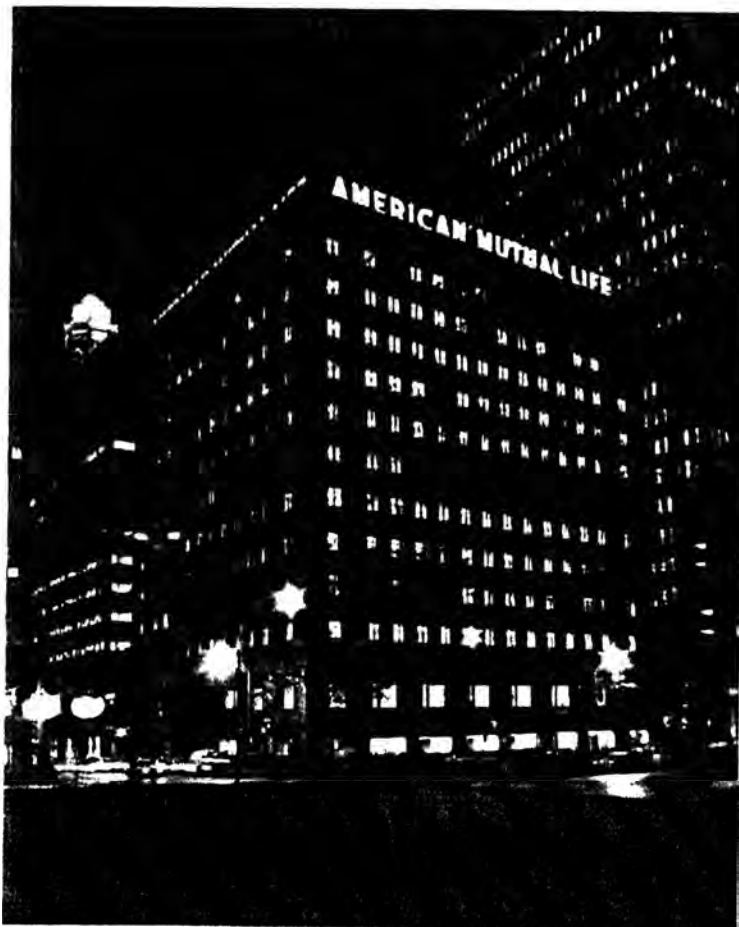


Figure #18

Large neon signs atop the north and east elevations of the Liberty Building identified it as the home office of the American Mutual Life Insurance Company and stood as landmarks on the Des Moines skyline until their removal circa 2003. The illuminated tower of the Equitable Building is also visible (left center). That skyscraper was erected the same year as the Liberty Building—1924.

Source: Barbara Beving Long, *Des Moines and Polk County, Flag on the Prairie*, p. 124.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
EVALUATION/RETURN SHEET

REQUESTED ACTION: NOMINATION

PROPERTY Liberty Building  
NAME:

MULTIPLE Architectural Legacy of Proudfoot & Bird in Iowa MPS  
NAME:

STATE & COUNTY: IOWA, Polk

DATE RECEIVED: 6/07/10 DATE OF PENDING LIST: 7/14/10  
DATE OF 16TH DAY: 7/29/10 DATE OF 45TH DAY: 7/22/10  
DATE OF WEEKLY LIST:

REFERENCE NUMBER: 10000488

REASONS FOR REVIEW:

APPEAL: N DATA PROBLEM: N LANDSCAPE: N LESS THAN 50 YEARS: N  
OTHER: Y PDIL: N PERIOD: N PROGRAM UNAPPROVED: N  
REQUEST: N SAMPLE: N SLR DRAFT: N NATIONAL: N

COMMENT WAIVER: N

ACCEPT  RETURN  REJECT 7-22-10 DATE

ABSTRACT/SUMMARY COMMENTS:

**Entered in  
The National Register  
of  
Historic Places**

RECOM./CRITERIA \_\_\_\_\_

REVIEWER \_\_\_\_\_ DISCIPLINE \_\_\_\_\_

TELEPHONE \_\_\_\_\_ DATE \_\_\_\_\_

DOCUMENTATION see attached comments Y/N see attached SLR Y/N



If a nomination is returned to the nominating authority, the nomination is no longer under consideration by the NPS.



LIBERTY BUILDING  
POLK CO., IA  
#1







LIBERTY BUILDING  
POLK CO., IA  
#2



LIBERTY BUILDING  
POLK CO., IA  
#3



LIBERTY BUILDING  
POLK CO., IA  
#4



LIBERTY BUILDING  
POLK CO., IA  
#5





LIBERTY BUILDING  
POLK CO., IA  
# 6



LIBERTY BUILDING  
POLK CO., IA  
# 7





HP Premium Plus

HP Premium Plus

LIBERTY BUILDING  
POLK CO., IA  
#8



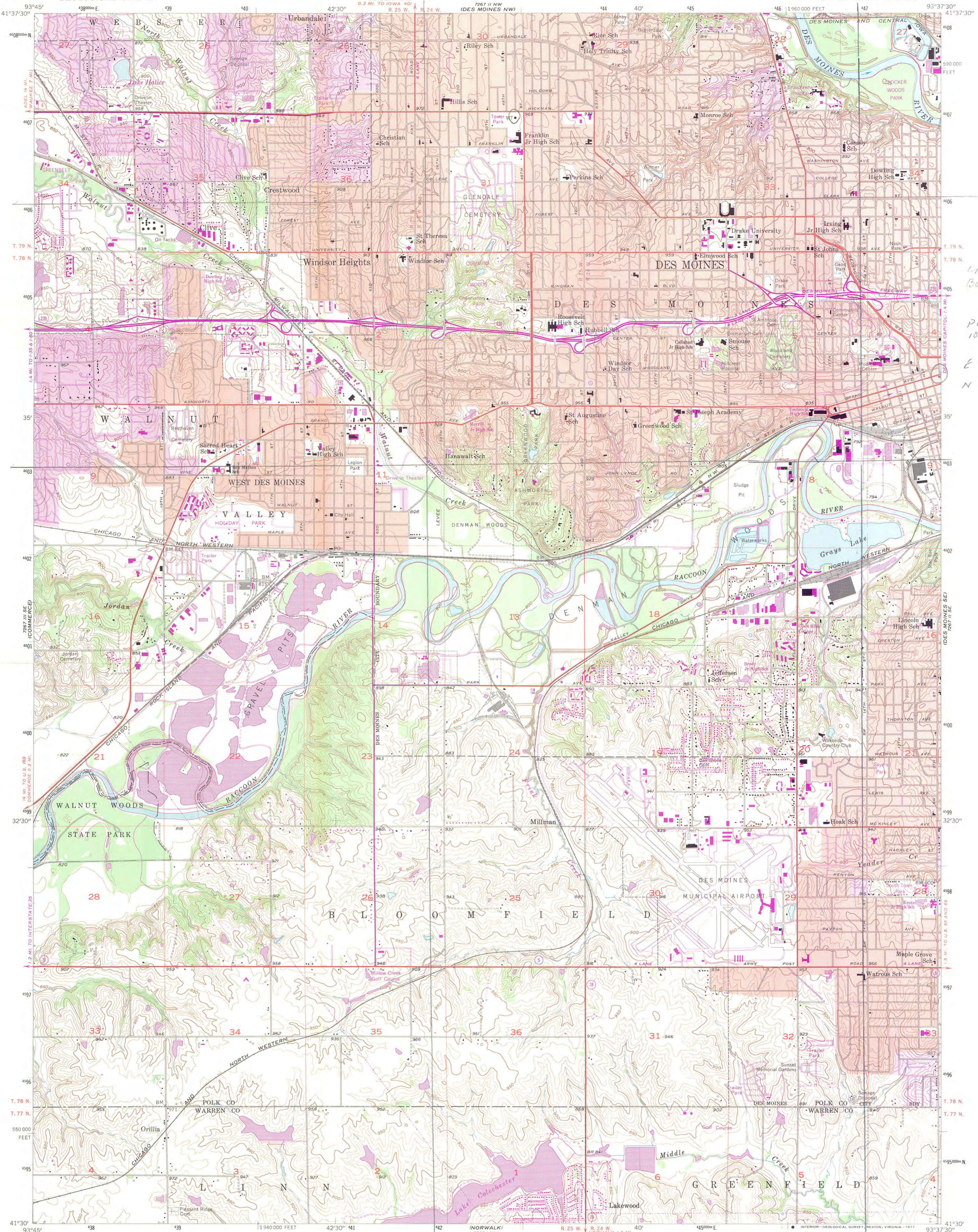


LIBERTY BUILDING  
POLK CO., IA  
#9



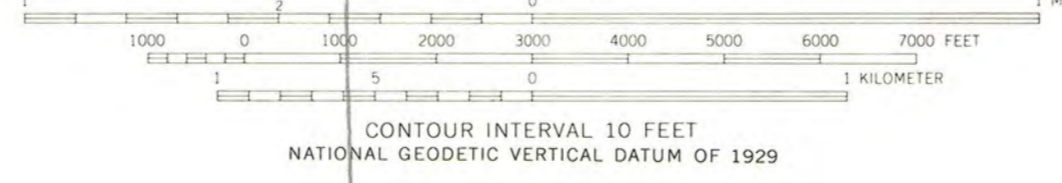
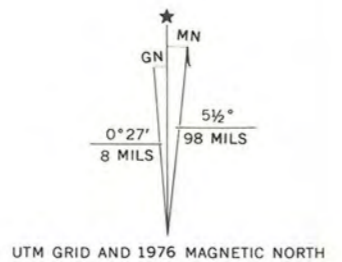


LIBERTY BUILDING  
POLK CO., IA  
#10



LIBERTY  
BUILDING  
  
POLK COUNTY  
IOWA  
  
E 447900  
N 4608960

Mapped, edited, and published by the Geological Survey in cooperation with Polk County and City of Des Moines  
Control by USGS, USC&GS, and Iowa Geodetic Survey  
Topography from aerial photographs by Kelsch plotter  
Aerial photographs taken 1956. Field check 1956  
Polyconic projection. 1927 North American datum  
10,000-foot grid based on Iowa coordinate system, south zone  
1000-meter Universal Transverse Mercator grid ticks, zone 15, shown in blue  
Red tint indicates areas in which only landmark buildings are shown  
City boundaries of Des Moines, West Des Moines, Clive, Urbandale, and Windsor Heights are in litigation  
Revisions shown in purple compiled from aerial photographs taken 1967, 1971, and 1976. This information not field checked  
Purple tint indicates extension of urban areas



SCALE 1:24,000  
CONTOUR INTERVAL 10 FEET  
NATIONAL GEODETIC VERTICAL DATUM OF 1929



ROAD CLASSIFICATION

Heavy-duty	Light-duty
Medium-duty	Unimproved dirt
Interstate Route	U.S. Route
	State Route

THIS MAP COMPLIES WITH NATIONAL MAP ACCURACY STANDARDS  
FOR SALE BY U.S. GEOLOGICAL SURVEY, DENVER, COLORADO 80225, OR RESTON, VIRGINIA 22092  
AND IOWA GEOLOGICAL SURVEY, IOWA CITY, IOWA 52240  
A FOLDER DESCRIBING TOPOGRAPHIC MAPS AND SYMBOLS IS AVAILABLE ON REQUEST

DES MOINES SW, IOWA  
SW 4 DES MOINES 15' QUADRANGLE  
N4130-W9337.5/7.5  
1956  
PHOTOREVISED 1967, 1971, AND 1976  
AMS 2767 II SW—SERIES V876



June 3, 2010

Carol Shull, Chief  
National Park Service  
National Register of Historic Places  
1201 Eye Street, N.W.-- 8<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Washington, D.C. 20005

Dear Ms. Shull:

The following National Register nomination(s) are enclosed for your review and listed if acceptable.

Liberty Building, 418 Sixth Avenue, Des Moines, Iowa, Polk County

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Foster Hill  
Tax Incentive Programs Manager/  
National Register Coordinator

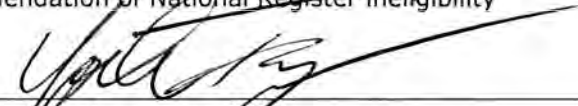
CLG NATIONAL REGISTER REVIEW

CLG Name Des Moines Date of Public Meeting 12/16/09

Property Name Liberty Building, 418 Sixth Avenue, Des Moines, Polk County

1. For Historic Preservation Commission:

- Recommendation of National Register eligibility
- Recommendation of National Register ineligibility

Signature 

Date 12/16/09

Print Name YORK TRAENZER

Title ACTING CHAIR

Reason(s) for recommendation:

CONCUR WITH THE FINDINGS IN THE NOMINATION.

2. For Chief Elected Local Official:

- Recommendation of National Register eligibility
- Recommendation of National Register ineligibility

Signature 

Date 12/22/09

Print Name T. M. Franklin Cownie

Title Mayor

Reason(s) for recommendation:

SAME AS ABOVE

3. Professional Evaluation:

- Recommendation of National Register eligibility
- Recommendation of National Register ineligibility

Signature 

Date 1/5/10

Print Name Paula Mohr

Title Architectural Historian

Reason(s) for recommendation: