

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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

FOR NPS USE ONLY

RECEIVED AUG 22 1979

DATE ENTERED OCT 11 1979

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

**1 NAME**

HISTORIC

Douglas County Courthouse

D009-2:13

AND/OR COMMON

**2 LOCATION**

STREET & NUMBER

1700 Farnam Street

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CITY, TOWN

Omaha

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

Second

STATE

Nebraska

VICINITY OF

CODE

031

COUNTY

Douglas

CODE

055

**3 CLASSIFICATION**

CATEGORY	OWNERSHIP	STATUS	PRESENT USE	
<input type="checkbox"/> DISTRICT	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PUBLIC	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> OCCUPIED	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSEUM
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BUILDING(S)	<input type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE	<input type="checkbox"/> UNOCCUPIED	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCIAL	<input type="checkbox"/> PARK
<input type="checkbox"/> STRUCTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> BOTH	<input type="checkbox"/> WORK IN PROGRESS	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATIONAL	<input type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE RESIDENCE
<input type="checkbox"/> SITE	<b>PUBLIC ACQUISITION</b>	<b>ACCESSIBLE</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> ENTERTAINMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> RELIGIOUS
<input type="checkbox"/> OBJECT	<input type="checkbox"/> IN PROCESS	<input type="checkbox"/> YES: RESTRICTED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> GOVERNMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENTIFIC
	<input type="checkbox"/> BEING CONSIDERED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> YES: UNRESTRICTED	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRIAL	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
		<input type="checkbox"/> NO	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER:

**4 OWNER OF PROPERTY**

NAME

The Douglas County Board of Commissioners

STREET & NUMBER

1819 Farnam Street

CITY, TOWN

Omaha

STATE

Nebraska

VICINITY OF

**5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION**

COURTHOUSE,  
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

Register of Deeds, Douglas County Courthouse

STREET & NUMBER

1819 Farnam Street

CITY, TOWN

Omaha

STATE

Nebraska

**6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS**

TITLE

Omaha City Architecture

DATE

1977

FEDERAL STATE COUNTY LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR  
SURVEY RECORDS

Omaha Landmarks, Inc.

CITY, TOWN

Omaha

STATE

Nebraska

## 7 DESCRIPTION

CONDITION		CHECK ONE	CHECK ONE
<input type="checkbox"/> EXCELLENT	<input type="checkbox"/> DETERIORATED	<input type="checkbox"/> UNALTERED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ORIGINAL SITE
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> RUINS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ALTERED	<input type="checkbox"/> MOVED DATE _____
<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> UNEXPOSED		

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### DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The 1909-12 Douglas County Courthouse occupies a four-acre site in downtown Omaha, Nebraska (1970 pop. 354,389). The building is deeply recessed from Farnam Street to the north and is separated from that route by a spacious lawn that contains both an axial and a semi-circular sidewalk. The walks are bordered with stone coping, and four cast-iron light standards installed ca. 1920 have been retained. Other buildings in the immediate vicinity span a wide range of styles, dates, and scales.

Designed by John Latenser, Sr., the courthouse is a symmetrical, U-shaped French Renaissance Revival edifice consisting of five stories over a full basement. Framing members are steel and the walls are Bedford oolitic limestone above a granite base. The roof is flat, except for a parasol-roofed skylight in the center.

The main (north) facade (see photos 1 and 2) has a nine-bay intercolumniated wall flanked by end pavilions. As on all other sides, the first floor is smoothly rusticated. Engaged Corinthian columns encompassing the second, third, and fourth stories of the recessed wall support a full entablature whose architrave is inscribed with the building's name. The pavilions are treated with acroteria-crowned pediments which are aligned with a continuous dentiled and modillioned cornice. The fifth floor, plainly treated and visually disengaged from the remainder of the building, served as a jail facility until recently.

The principal entrance is a three-bay arcade that has a frontispiece surmounted by a nonfunctional balcony resting on consoled piers. The frontispiece is somewhat lavish; the surrounds and spandrels are rusticated, the soffits have coffers with egg-and-dart molding, and the consoles are embellished with festoons (see photo 4). The arcade is approached from a balustraded terrace which is equal in width to the frontispiece.

All windows of the courthouse, excepting those of the jail (fifth floor) and the inside walls of the pavilions, are tripartite. Each window section originally contained a one-over-one pane arrangement, but all have been altered to single panes--solar bronze glass has been inserted and anodized aluminum has replaced the wooden sash.

Decorative stonework, superbly executed, is plentiful on the courthouse's exterior. Windows of the main facade's second floor are treated with dentiled flat arches and their sections are separated by paneled pilasters enlivened with foliage-like pendants. Between the third and fourth floors are panels enriched with full wreaths and with Greek fret, egg-and-dart, and talon moldings. Windows of the end pavilions are set in recesses, with the fourth-floor opening of each being surrounded on three sides by a bay leaf garland. These openings are also flanked on either side by an eagle within a wreath, atop a fasces with swirling ribands (see photos 4 and 5).

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The west side of the courthouse has a five-bay intercolumniated pavilion of slight projection (see photo 3). The engaged piers with Corinthian capitals rest on a smoothly rusticated base and the window treatment is identical to the main facade's. The entire basement was originally exposed on the west due to an excavated sidewalk approach which descended to that level. Recently, however, a new city-county governmental building was erected on the opposite side of 18th Street and an elevated plaza that serves as a pedestrian connector now encases the basement.

The rear (south) facade of the courthouse (see photo 3) is essentially different from the front in two respects: the end pavilions have no noticeable projection, and, due to the sloping site, the basement level is fully exposed on this side, creating a six-story elevation. In addition, the three-bay entrance on the south is trabeated rather than arched. The east side is a virtual duplication of the west, but the basement level is fully exposed here also, again creating a six-story elevation.

The interior of the Douglas County Courthouse retains little of its early-20th-century character. Alterations have been numerous and constant, commencing in 1919 when a riot and an accompanying fire caused over \$1,000,000 in damage to the upper floors. The most unaffected portion of the building is the rotunda, a space that makes use of expensive materials (see photos 6, 7, and 8). The rotunda's polychromatic terrazzo flooring incorporates civic motifs; balconies, wainscoting, and piers in this area are sheathed with marble. Covering the rotunda is a double skylight described in the following manner in the (Omaha) Sunday World-Herald on September 26, 1912: "The upper skylight protects the lower and ornamental skylight, which is of opalescent glass and is entirely free from all structural portions, hanging in the dome like a huge umbrella" (page 2B). Actually, I beams support the skylight's purlins, the ends of the purlins forming cantilevers. The dome is also adorned with eight mural panels that depict the development of the West. These scenes were painted by William Rau of New York City and are executed in oil on canvas.

The disposition of the jail facility in the Douglas County Courthouse was considerably innovative, though not unique, for its time. As built, the jail, which occupied the fifth floor, and the courthouse were treated as two separate buildings. The jail was furnished with its own heating main, water pipes, ventilating system, elevators, and stairways. The architect stated that the plan of the building was such that an ordinary visitor would not suspect the existence of a jail on the top floor (Ibid.). Lately, a new county jail has been constructed in a separate location and the fifth floor of the courthouse has ceased to serve its original function. The remainder of the building, excluding the rotunda, has been thoroughly renovated.

# 8 SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD		AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW				
<input type="checkbox"/> PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNITY PLANNING	<input type="checkbox"/> LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> RELIGION		
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-HISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> CONSERVATION	<input type="checkbox"/> LAW	<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENCE		
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> ECONOMICS	<input type="checkbox"/> LITERATURE	<input type="checkbox"/> SCULPTURE		
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATION	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input type="checkbox"/> SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN		
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> ART	<input type="checkbox"/> ENGINEERING	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSIC	<input type="checkbox"/> THEATER		
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCE	<input type="checkbox"/> EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> PHILOSOPHY	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION		
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNICATIONS	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRY	<input type="checkbox"/> POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY)		
		<input type="checkbox"/> INVENTION				

SPECIFIC DATES            1909-12

BUILDER/ARCHITECT            John Latenser, Sr.

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The 1909-12 Douglas County Courthouse is architecturally significant to Omaha and Nebraska as an outstanding product of the French Renaissance Revival. In the career of its architect, John Latenser, Sr., the courthouse figures importantly, for it is a mature and triumphant work that commenced the latter half of his practice. High qualities of the stonemason's art are employed in the exterior and the building serves as a landmark edifice in the rapidly changing downtown section of Omaha, a city of 354,389 (1970 census).

In March, 1908, the Commissioners of Douglas County passed a resolution calling for the erection of a new courthouse. Two months later, voters overwhelmingly approved a bond issue to finance construction and the commissioners engaged John Latenser, Sr., to provide plans for a building whose cost should not exceed \$1,000,000. Latenser's design for a French Renaissance Revival edifice to occupy the previous courthouse site was submitted in early 1909, construction of it began in the Spring of that same year, and the new courthouse was occupied on October 1, 1912.

The land which Douglas County occupies was ceded by the Omaha Indians in 1854. The community of Omaha was founded that same year and a building boom was launched. During the years of the new courthouse's construction, the city's population was about 125,000 and its geographical area was 24.5 square miles (Omaha Sunday Bee Magazine, October 20, 1912, p. 84).

John Latenser, Sr. (1858-1936), a native of Liechtenstein, was a third-generation architect. He received his professional training at the Royal Polytechnic School in Stuttgart, Germany, studying architecture in the winter months and working as a stonecutter in the summers. He immigrated to America and practiced in several cities before settling in Omaha in 1885 where his practice initially involved producing cottage designs. A turning point in Latenser's career came in the early 1890s when he devised a successful method for correcting the faulty foundation of the Federal post office in Chicago. As a result, President Cleveland appointed him superintendent of the Federal building in Omaha (History of Nebraska, Vol. III, p. 617). Latenser enjoyed a prolific practice, most of his commissions being for public school buildings.

# 9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

See continuation sheet

## 10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY 4 acres

QUADRANGLE NAME Omaha North

QUADRANGLE SCALE 1:24000

UTM REFERENCES

A | 1,5 | 2,5,3,7,8,10 | 4,5,7,12,3,10

B | | | | |

ZONE EASTING NORTHING

ZONE EASTING NORTHING

C | | | | |

D | | | | |

E | | | | |

F | | | | |

G | | | | |

H | | | | |

### VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

The courthouse square in Omaha; bordered by Farnam Street on the north, 18th Street on the west, Harney on the south, and 17th on the east.

### LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES

STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE

STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE

## 11 FORM PREPARED BY

NAME / TITLE

Daniel Kidd, Architectural Historian

ORGANIZATION

Nebraska State Historical Society

DATE

August, 1979

STREET & NUMBER

1500 R Street

TELEPHONE

402/471-3270

CITY OR TOWN

Lincoln

STATE

Nebraska

## 12 STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION

THE EVALUATED SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PROPERTY WITHIN THE STATE IS:

NATIONAL

STATE

LOCAL

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

STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER SIGNATURE

Marion E. Knott

8/6/79

TITLE

Director, Nebraska State Historical Society

DATE

FOR NPS USE ONLY

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

Carol Skell

DATE

10-11-79

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

ATTEST:

William H. Brennan

DATE

10.10.79

CHIEF OF REGISTRATION

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Latenser's design met with public approval, as evinced by the following statement in a local newspaper following its completion: "Omaha men who travel say that the new Douglas County building is one of the handsomest in the country, not more than five or six county or municipal buildings being finer" (Ibid.). Five years later, an historian called the building". . . one of the most practical courthouses in the United States, the principal object of the architect apparently having been to design a building for use rather than show. The outside walls have . . . very little ornament, creating a building that gives the impression of solidity, and beautiful in its simplicity" (Wakely, Omaha: The Gate City, and Douglas County, Vol. I, 1917, p. 135). The latter statement is erroneous in referring to simplicity and little ornamentation; Latenser provided that the courthouse's exterior be embellished, much decorative stonework existing in classical motifs. The interior, as originally carried out, was somewhat opulent also, but successive alterations have affected its integrity in all parts excepting the central space which is crowned by a double skylight and by a dome filled with mural panels. Despite interior mutations, though, the exterior significantly retains its salient features and stands out in the downtown section of Omaha as a handsome early-20th-century edifice.

The reason for Latenser's selecting the French Renaissance for the courthouse is unknown. He may have attended or been familiar with the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, or his knowledge of the style could be attributed to his European background. Regardless, he handled the style freely in the design for the courthouse, narrowing the rusticated ground floor's arcade to three bays and widening the windows to a full extent between the intercolumniation. Omaha Central High School, another substantial public building designed in the French Renaissance Revival by Latenser, is 2,000 feet northwest of the Douglas County Courthouse, and is being nominated to the National Register of Historic Places simultaneously.

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Goeldner, Paul Kenneth. "Temples of Justice: Nineteenth Century Court-houses in the Midwest and Texas." Unpublished Ph. D. Dissertation. Department of Fine Arts, Columbia University, 1970.

Omaha Sunday Bee Magazine. Omaha, Nebraska. October 20, 1912, p. 84.

Sunday World-Herald. Omaha, Nebraska. September 26, 1912, p. 2B  
October 6, 1912, p. 6E.

Wakely, Arthur. Omaha: The Gate City, and Douglas County, Nebraska, Vol. I. Chicago: S. J. Clarke Pub. Co., 1917.

Watkins, Albert. History of Nebraska, Vol. III. Lincoln: Western Pub. and Engraving Co., 1913.

Additional information supplied by William Latenser and Nori Okada, William Latenser and Associates, Omaha, May 29, 1979, including examination of John Latenser and Sons File #315, Douglas County Courthouse.