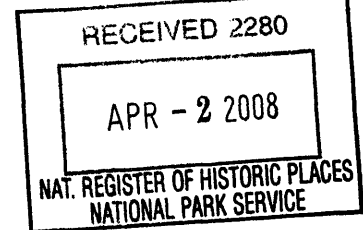


**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form**



403

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" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any 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, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name United States Post Office, Fairmont

other names/site number _____

2. Location

street & number 51-55 Downtown Plaza not for publication N/A

city or town Fairmont vicinity

state Minnesota code MN county Martin code 091 zip code 56031

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.)

Britta L. Bloomberg 3/28/08
Signature of certifying official Date

Britta L. Bloomberg, Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer, Minnesota Historical Society

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 this 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): _____

Signature of the Keeper

Edson H. Ball

Date of Action

5.12.08

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

Category of Property

(Check only one box)

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1		buildings
		sites
		structure
		objects
1		Total

Name of related multiple property listing

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

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

GOVERNMENT: post office

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

COMMERCE: business

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions)

Late 19th Century and 20th Century Revivals/

Colonial Revival/ Georgian Revival

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation concrete

walls brick

roof asphalt

other

Narrative Description

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

See continuation sheets.

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes 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" in all the boxes 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 a 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)

POLITICS/GOVERNMENT

COMMERCE

Period of Significance

1926-1957

Significant Dates

1926

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Wetmore, James (architect)

Comb, Fred R. (builder)

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical 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):

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

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of repository:

Northwest Architectural Archives

10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of Property approximately .5 acres Fairmont, MN 1992

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

1.	<u>1</u> <u>5</u>	<u>3</u> <u>8</u> <u>2</u> <u>1</u> <u>1</u> <u>5</u>	<u>4</u> <u>8</u> <u>3</u> <u>4</u> <u>0</u> <u>8</u> <u>8</u>
	Zone	Easting	Northing
2.	<u> </u> <u> </u>	<u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u>	<u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u>
3.	<u> </u> <u> </u>	<u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u>	<u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u>
	Zone	Easting	Northing
4.	<u> </u> <u> </u>	<u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u>	<u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u>

See continuation sheet

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	<u>Daniel J. Hoisington</u>		
organization	<u> </u>	date	<u>1/1/2008</u>
street and number	<u>P. O. Box 13790</u>		telephone <u>651-415-1034</u>
city or town	<u>Roseville</u>	state <u>MN</u>	zip code <u>55113</u>

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 the SHPO or FPO.)

name	<u>Steven L. Pierce</u>		
street & number	<u>51-55 Downtown Plaza</u>	telephone	<u>507-238-4304</u>
city or town	<u>Fairmont</u>	state <u>MN</u>	zip code <u>56031</u>

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.). A federal agency may not conduct or sponsor, and a person is not required to respond to, a collection of information unless it contains a valid OMB control number.

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to range from approximately 18 to 36 hours depending on several factors including, but not limited to, how much documentation may already exist on the type of property being nominated and whether the property is being nominated as part of a Multiple Property Documentation Form. In most cases, it is estimated to average 36 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form to meet minimum National Register documentation requirements. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, 1849 C St., Washington, DC 20240.

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7. Narrative Description

The Fairmont United States Post Office is located on a half-acre parcel of land in the central business district of Fairmont, Martin County, Minnesota. The community is located in south central Minnesota, approximately thirty miles north of the Iowa border.

The building stands on a spacious, flat corner lot on the northeast corner of Blue Earth Avenue and Downtown Plaza (originally North Avenue). The Fairmont Opera House, listed on the National Register of Historic Places (1980), is located on the southeast corner on the intersection. A paved parking lot behind the post office surrounds the mailing platform. The rear of the lot is bounded by an alley.

This one-story building is rectangular and symmetrical in massing, with overall dimensions of 61 feet by 69 feet and 8,660 square feet of floor space. The central entry faces Downtown Plaza. Foundation, walls, piers, and floors are constructed of reinforced concrete. Exterior walls are covered with a reddish-brown brick laid in American bond with every fifth course composed of headers. Buff-colored limestone is used for the water table and the window sills.

The wide wooden cornice has dentils and is surmounted by a wood and brick balustrade. The flat roof is covered with composition tar and gravel. A brick chimney rises from the top of the roof.

The west elevation, facing North Avenue has five bays and a central entrance. The main entry is pedimented with a single-entry door, paned sidelights, and a fixed transom above. Four concrete steps flanked by a pair of original wrought iron lampposts lead up to a classical entrance, which is framed by fluted pilasters supporting a pediment with dentils. On each side of the entrance are a pair of tall, narrow four-light sidelights.

Fenestration on the north and south elevations feature five bays with three sets of double-hung paused 15/15 windows set in recessed segmental arches. Windows are rectangular, 8 feet high and 3 feet wide. These are modern replacements of aluminum construction with false muntins replicating the original patterns. The two windows flanking them on either side are double-hung single windows slightly recessed under a full arch with no transom. There is a full basement with casement windows below ground level, with window wells on the north and south elevations, covered by iron grates.

The cornerstone, located on the southwest corner of the building, reads:

A.W. Mellon
Secretary of the Treasury
James A. Wetmore
Acting Supervising Architect
1926

The exterior of the post office is well-preserved and in excellent condition. The original wooden front doors were replaced at an unknown date with aluminum and glass doors. The loading platform was enclosed with brick in 1975. The four loading bay doors were removed in 2002, and filled with brick and rectangular windows.

On the interior, the first floor included the lobby, the postmaster's office and vault, and a customer service window. The original postmaster's office with safe and bathroom as well as the observation room above the vestibule has been retained during recent renovations. The terrazzo floor in the lobby with a marble base and skylight has been retained, as well as

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wainscoting in the vestibule. The basement space included the fuel room, boiler room, and storage rooms. The basement is intact.

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8. Statement of Significance

The United States Post Office, located in Fairmont, Minnesota, is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A, significance to the broad patterns of our history. The building is locally significant in the area of significance of politics and government, providing an important presence of the federal government in the community and playing an essential role in facilitating communication and promoting local economy.¹

Constructed in 1926, the property is also significant for the role that it played in Fairmont's commercial development in the midst of the community's burgeoning growth as an agricultural processing center. Following the introduction and expansion of the parcel post service, Fairmont required a new, larger post office to handle the shipment of millions of dollars of agricultural goods throughout the region, while bringing urban consumer goods to the doorsteps of its residents. As a prominent and substantial federal building with regular patronage from local citizens, it solidified the development of a new downtown commercial district on North Avenue.

The Fairmont Post Office also reflects the policies of the federal government that were in place during the time of construction. The Public Buildings Act of 1913 attempted to take the construction of new federal buildings out of the political arena through the institution of a classification system. Hence, the Fairmont building followed the guidelines for size and design for a Class C city — one of modest size and ornamentation but a step above those of the smaller surrounding towns.

The property relates to the statewide historic context, "Railroads and Agricultural Development, 1870-1940."

Economic Growth in the 1920s

Fairmont, Minnesota, located just north of the Iowa border, was first settled in 1856, with the first post office established October 9, 1858, with William H. Budd as Postmaster. With the arrival of the Southern Minnesota Railroad in 1878, the town grew slowly for several decades, reaching a population of 4,630 by 1920, then jumping to 5,418 in 1925.²

Drawing from a rich agricultural area, Fairmont developed into a regional processing center by the 1920s. The Fairmont Canning Company opened in 1920, quickly becoming one of the major food processors in the upper Midwest, turning out more than a million dollars worth of corn, peas, squash, and pumpkins in a typical year. A state food inspector noted, "The Fairmont Canning factory has the largest output of fancy corn of any factory in the United States. It is the largest canning factory in Minnesota, and probably in the United States. The factory this year will employ 400 men and women."³

Other agricultural industries contributed to the local economy. The Fairmont Packing Company processed eggs, butter and poultry, employing sixty to one hundred workers with a payroll of \$72,000. Fairmont was also a major hatchery

¹ Beth M. Boland, *National Register Bulletin: How to Apply the National Register Criteria to Post Offices* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Interior, 1994).

² Arthur R. Moro, "The English Colony at Fairmont in the Seventies," *Minnesota History* (March 1927), 140-149.

³ *Fairmont Sentinel*, 14 May 1925; 7 August 1924. By the 1940s, the company employed as many as five thousand workers in season, with a payroll of \$2,500,000.

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center, selling around 2,500,000 chicks per year throughout the Midwest. In 1925, the year construction began on the new post office, the Fairmont Cooperative Creamery opened its new plant.⁴

The town boasted a major non-agricultural industry. Established in 1909, the Fairmont Railway Motors built railroad cars, with sales of more than \$3,500,000 annually. The *Fairmont Sentinel* proudly reported, "The year 1925 saw the start of the greatest building boom Fairmont has ever had. This includes the filtration plant, the post office, gas plant, and more than 100 private building enterprises."⁵

The Role of the Post Office

Business growth alone would have placed tremendous demands upon the local post office. The lack of an adequate building became all the more evident as the federal government greatly expanded its services. With a four-pound limit on mail, most packages had been handled by private companies such as Adams Express or American Express. Following the introduction of Rural Free Delivery (RFD) in 1896, political leaders in rural states, backed by catalogue giants such as Sears, Roebuck, and Wanamakers, pressed for expansion of postal services to include packages. However, the private express companies, traveling salesmen, and retail merchants fought bitterly against parcel post, preventing introduction of the service for more than a decade.⁶

With the introduction of Parcel Post service on January 1, 1913, local post offices were inundated with packages. During the first six months of operation approximately 300 million parcels were handled, boosted even more by the introduction of collect-on-delivery (COD) service on July 1, 1913. At the same time — just six months after the service began — the maximum weight was increased from eleven to twenty pounds. Soon, the maximum rose again, from twenty to fifty pounds.

It led to a rapid growth in mail order businesses. In the program's first year, Sears, Roebuck, and Company received five times the number of orders it had received in 1912. While Montgomery Ward and Company's totals were less spectacular, its revenues tripled from 1912 to 1920.⁷

In Fairmont, the newspaper heralded the advent of parcel post service, and immediately began a campaign for a new post office building, stating, "The parcel post is about to render the small package a familiar object in the 60,000 post offices of the United States."⁸

Shortly after the institution of parcel post, the *Fairmont Sentinel* noted the increased traffic:

⁴ *Fairmont Sentinel*, 23 September 1925; *Fairmont Sentinel*, 29 December 1925.

⁵ *Fairmont Sentinel*, 23 September 1925.

⁶ Henry H. Gobie, *U.S. Parcel Post: A Postal History* (Miami: Postal Publications, 1979); Meg Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 29-30.

⁷ Wayne E. Fuller, *RFD: The Changing Face of Rural America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), 254.

⁸ *Fairmont Sentinel*, 29 December 1925.

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The parcel post business at the Fairmont post office is growing by leaps and bounds. The first package received was several pounds of butter from East Chain for a First Warder. There were 163 outgoing packages during the first seven days of the business in Fairmont and every succeeding day shows an increase. The Fairmont Machine Company receives and sends more packages than a half dozen firms in this city.⁹

There was a direct connection between the growth of local industries and the need for a new post office building. Farmers were able to ship eggs and other produce directly to the consumer, saving both time and money. A single local firm, Kramer Hatchery, mailed 12,000 catalogues to farmers in December 1926. The editor of the *Fairmont Sentinel* observed, "The chicken hatcheries which send through the Fairmont post office in a single day as high as twenty-two thousand cunning little peepers are always objects of interest. Very soon we will be able to show the most modern post office in Minnesota — a thing of beauty and a joy and pride to every citizen."¹⁰

In addition, the Post Office Department instituted the Postal Saving System in 1910 on an experimental basis, then nationwide in 1912. The program offered a convenient way to save money, attracting cautious savers of modest means. In the years between World War I and the Depression, deposits nationwide varied between \$131 million and \$167 million. These new programs altered the physical requirements for a post office building. As a conduit for shopping and banking, new designs had to incorporate increased windows and storage space.

Congress Approves a New Building

Throughout the 1920s, however, federal construction dropped to a trickle under Republican austerity, with only seventy-five post office structures nationwide between 1920 and 1926. In Fairmont, the post office remained in its rented space in the Knights of Pythias Hall on the corner of Main Street and W. First Street, sharing space with a cigar and notions store.¹¹

Finally, the project won congressional approval in 1924. The editor of the *Sentinel* explained,

Thus is finally determined the long fight Fairmont has made to procure a suitable post office building—something that should have been provided years ago. The matter has dragged along for years—through the incumbency of Congressmen Hammond and Ellsworth — until final action has at last been procured through the efforts of Congressman Clague.

The selection of a site was of great interest to local storeowners since its services generated customer traffic, and its physical presence, as a well-designed, substantial building, offered a visual anchor to downtown. Its eventual location would play a crucial role in the future of the Fairmont business district, with newer stores opening on North Avenue rather

⁹ *Fairmont Sentinel*, 13 January 1913.

¹⁰ *Fairmont Sentinel*, 20 July 1925; 16 January 1926.

¹¹ James H. Bruns, *Great American Post Offices* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1998); Sanborn Insurance Maps, Fairmont, 1905, 1911, 1917.

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than Main Street. A new federal building would solidify the location of the commercial center. Over the next decade, rumors regularly surfaced in newspaper columns, suggesting one site or another. An actual sale came close to completion around 1915, but the lack of adequate funds halted the property acquisition. Years later, the *Sentinel* reported, "Some ten years ago when the lots across the street from the Fairmont Hotel were vacant, they were approved for a post office site but before the department was able to exercise its option buildings were constructed and the site withdrawn."¹²

Once the federal government approved construction, it purchased an empty lot from the Fairmont Auto and Realty Company for \$15,000, intended for a service station. Located on the intersection of North Avenue, across Blue Earth Avenue from the Fairmont Opera House, it solidified the place of that street as the primary commercial district. The newspaper reported, "After careful investigations the department was convinced that the site selected was the best available, though there were proposals for a number of other sites — among them the Mackuben feed barn corner and the Allison lots north of the Armory. These were rejected as too remote from the business center of the city."¹³

Although it was a federal project — paid through a \$55,000 appropriation — local businessmen contributed additional site acquisition funds, suggesting the importance of the project to the downtown businesses. The newspaper editor crowed, "Naturally, the *Sentinel* is tickled that its long fight for a federal building for Fairmont has been won and that the city is finally to have postal accommodations in keeping with its commercial needs and importance. The fact that the post office is to be situated so conveniently to the Sentinel office has something to do with the gratification herein expressed."¹⁴

Design of the Building

In the 1920s, the Treasury Office of the Supervising Architect worked under tight design and construction constraints due to a series of reforms adopted by the department in the preceding decade. In 1902 the first Omnibus Public Law was enacted, resulting in an increase in the number of public buildings. Since Congress controlled the authorization process, small towns and rural areas often received grand federal buildings (typically post offices) based on political clout rather than need.

Passed in a wave of progressive reform in 1913, the Public Buildings Act, which authorized the construction of a large number of public buildings, sought to eliminate politics from the process by prohibiting the construction of new post office buildings in communities whose postal receipts totaled less than \$10,000. The Act empowered a new Public Building Commission (PBC) to oversee the construction and site acquisition for all new federal buildings. Its first chairman, Secretary of the Treasury William McAdoo, pushed through a classification system under which a city's postal receipts determined the size and ornamentation of new federal buildings. Although post offices in large cities could still be

¹² *Fairmont Sentinel*, 30 December 1912; 6 January 1913; 21 May 1924.

¹³ *Fairmont Sentinel*, 21 May 1924.

¹⁴ Evidence suggests that the government looked at less expensive properties not on North Avenue, placing pressure on the local businessmen to donate money for site acquisition. For a similar case, see Bruns, 237-38.

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monumental, the standards specified that a small town could only have an “ordinary class of building, such as any businessman would consider a reasonable investment.”

*Classification System for Federal Buildings*¹⁵

Class A	Buildings that include a post office of the first class with annual receipts of \$800,000 or over; the site forming part of a city development plan or situated on an important thoroughfare of a great city; improvements on adjoining property reaching the higher valuation of metropolitan real estate.	Marble or granite facing; fireproof throughout; metal frames, sashes, and doors; interior finish to include the finer grades of marble, ornamental bronze work, mahogany, etc. Public spaces to have monumental treatment, mural decorations; special interior lighting fixtures.
Class B	Buildings that include a post office of the first class with receipts from \$60,000 to \$800,000; valuation of adjoining property somewhat below the higher valuation of metropolitan real estate.	Limestone or sandstone facing; fireproof throughout; exterior frames and sash metal; interior frames, sash, and doors wood; interior finish to exclude the more expensive woods and marbles; ornamental metal to be used only where iron is suitable. Restricted ornament in public spaces.
Class C	Buildings that include a post office of the second class with receipts of \$15,000 or over, and of the first class to \$60,000 receipts; valuation of surrounding property that of a second-class city.	Brick facing with stone or terra-cotta trimmings; fireproof floors; non-fireproof roof; frames, sashes, and doors wood; interior finish to exclude the more expensive woods and marbles; the latter used only where sanitary conditions demand; public spaces restricted to very simple forms of ornament.
Class D	Buildings that include a post office having annual receipts of less than \$15,000; real estate values identifying only a limited investment for improvements.	Brick facing, little stone or terra cotta used; only first floor fireproof, stock sash, frames, doors, etc., where advisable; ordinary class of building, such as any businessman would consider a reasonable investment in a small town.

¹⁵ Secretary of the U. S. Treasury Department, *Annual Report on the Finances, 1915* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1915). Also see Lois Craig, ed. *The Federal Presence: Architecture, Politics, and Symbols in the United States Government Building* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1979).

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Earlier policies employed architects to design post offices individually, but under the new strictures, the Supervising Architect's Office used the same design and floor plan whenever possible, and rarely hired private architects.¹⁶

Fairmont was considered a "Class C" city, meaning that the new post office building would rely on a standard design with little embellishment. Speaking to a local Kiwanis meeting, Congressman Clague, boasted of his ability to bring a federal project to the city. The *Sentinel* reporter summarized the Clague's remarks:

While Fairmont is not getting as fine a post office building, and not getting it as promptly as he would like to see, the city is lucky to be getting a building at all, as there have been no appropriations for new public buildings in the last ten years and are not likely to be any for some years to come. Fairmont is one of only seven cities in the United States to get [a post office] this year. The congressman said that Fairmont's post office business and general importance entitled it to a more ornate building than is possible with the \$55,000 appropriation.¹⁷

James Wetmore, Supervising Architect for the Treasury Department from 1915 to 1933, was the architect of record for the new building. In this capacity, Wetmore supervised the design of post office buildings for Duluth, Fairmont, Little Falls, Mankato (1932 addition) Montevideo, St. Peter, and South St. Paul. George McMartin, listed as Acting Supervising Architect, handled most of the correspondence. The Treasury Department assigned Theodore Lang, construction site superintendent. Lang moved to Fairmont in November 1925, having completed the management of a project in Rochester, Indiana, and remained until completion of the project in August 1926.¹⁸

Although most architects chafed at the classification system, Wetmore supported the reform, claiming that it "provided a rational system of uniformity and business economy in designing and constructing federal buildings, suitable in each instance to the public needs and without calling for waste in Government money." Wetmore hoped to create a "master type of building for small communities," one that could perhaps be used in many locations. The Fairmont Post Office is a well-preserved example. William Collier, district engineer for the Treasury Department, described Fairmont's plans as "a stock type used in cities of this size and the government has built more than fifty of them. They are proving very satisfactory."¹⁹

After site preparation began, rumors from Washington, D.C., created a brief flurry of excitement. Regional newspapers reported that Congress was prepared to authorize as much as \$50,000 in additional funds for the project. Immediately, plans floated as to the best way to improve on the current plans. Congressman Clague, Postmaster E. J. Merry, and local Republican leader and attorney, Benjamin Ballou, forcefully argued for more space. Ballou told the local newspaper,

¹⁶ Beth M. Boland, *National Register Bulletin 13: How to Apply the National Register Criteria to Post Offices* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Interior, 1994).

¹⁷ *Fairmont Sentinel*, 28 September 1925.

¹⁸ *Fairmont Sentinel*, 30 July 1926; Theodore Lang to George Martin, November 1925, private collection. Lang was described as "a veteran of the service."

¹⁹ *Fairmont Sentinel*, 14 July 1926. A review of surveyed Minnesota post offices in the Minnesota State Historic Preservation did not reveal any matches, however.

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Under the present arrangements, it is feared that there will be little more room in the new post office than in the old one. During the holiday rush the post office force had to pile packages in the backyard clear to the alley. If the weather had been stormy, I don't know what they would have done. These conditions will be repeated this spring when the rush of chicken shipping starts. If that recreation room and toilets are put on the first floor of the new building, there is not going to be anywhere nearly enough room. Now is the time to correct this situation. We want to get a first class building that will be adequate to the city's needs if there is any chance to do so.²⁰

Some local leaders hoped that extra funds might be used to "provide a handsomer building through the use of stone and terra cotta trimmings instead of cement and wood." Many businessmen who donated money for the land purchase suggested that they might be reimbursed. Ballou quickly scotched that request. "It looks like a closed incident," he said, "but I suppose, if there were a surplus, the matter could be taken up." The rumors died just as suddenly, with the speculation triggered by the introduction of a massive pork barrel appropriations bill by a Mississippi congressman. The bill failed to secure passage. Although disappointed, Ballou emphasized that any post office building was important, since only seven cities *in the country* received new post offices in 1925.²¹

Construction

In October 1925, the government let the construction contract to the Fred R. Comb Company of Minneapolis, Minnesota, following a competitive bid. Early in the construction process, Comb confronted a major problem when crews hit water just three feet below the basement. It apparently did not surprise those familiar with the site. A local business leader recalled, "The area where the post office is now located was quite a low spot and I have been told that at one time there were muskrat houses in the slough before it was filled in with dirt from excavations around the town."²²

Work halted as Lang, Combs, and the Supervisory Architect's Office in Washington discussed their options. Following an on-site inspection, Lang approved a deeper excavation and foundation footings. Still, he expressed his dissatisfaction with progress to the contractor, pressing Combs to make up for lost time.²³

One humorous newspaper column suggests the strong community interest in their new post office. A droll reporter wrote,

A full panel of jurymen was on hand when the work was resumed this morning. Some of them, they say, brought their lunches. The Driscoll corner and the First National Bank window ledges were deserted. It is understood that a number

²⁰ *Fairmont Sentinel*, 1 January, 12 January 1926.

²¹ "Extra Coin for New P. O. Still is Possibility," *Fairmont Sentinel*, 24 February 1926.

²² *Fairmont Sentinel*, 17 October 1925; Albert Niss, *Eighty Years of Change in Downtown Fairmont Minnesota, 1906-1986* (Fairmont: Fairmont Photo Press, 1987), 10-11.

²³ Theodore Lang to Fred R. Comb, 15 February 1926; *Fairmont Sentinel*, 14 November 1925.

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of the sightseers had not been consulted on the post office plans and determined to personally see that the thing was built right. Cold sweat stood on their brow when they heard that Superintendent Nels Vingom intended erecting a high board fence around the post office lot, to keep his men from being bothered. "Nobody ever did that before," they protested. Supt. Vingom said later that he had abandoned the fence idea and would probably put up a hot dog stand. If a fence goes in, John Krumholz says he will put bleacher seats on his roof and make enough money to buy another farm.²⁴

Once the contractor laid the foundation, construction proceeded on schedule until April, when the foreman walked off the job. The *Fairmont Sentinel* reported,

Nels Vingom, in charge of the construction work on the new post office since its beginning last November, has resigned and returned to his home in Minneapolis. Some time ago a Sentinel reporter wrote an item commending Mr. Vingom for the rapid progress made on the post office building. This innocent item brought a sharp letter of censure from the contractor, Fred R. Comb, admonishing Mr. Vingom in giving out newspaper reports to give credit to the company and not to himself. Mr. Vingom was also censured, he stated, for taking a day or two off to look after important personal business. He at once sent in his resignation. Of course, it is silly to conclude that any commendation given him by the Sentinel was at his suggestion. Mr. Vingom has shown himself a gentleman as well as a capable construction foreman.²⁵

However, Theodore Lang reported to Washington that Combs had discharged Vingom. For several days, the construction crew refused to continue work. The contractor quickly assigned a new foreman, who mollified the workers, and work began again. Even with these delays, the contractor completed the building twenty days ahead of schedule.²⁶

Dedication

Two public ceremonies marked the stages of construction, suggesting the significance of the new building to Fairmont. In February 1926, the city held an elaborate cornerstone-laying program with band music, Masonic lodge ceremonies, and an address by local clergyman Rev. W. W. Blair. Blair called the building, "an illustration of the benefits of American citizenship and of the regard of the national government for the communities under its jurisdiction." Alluding to the long struggle for approval, he declared:

It is very proper and fitting that we perform these ceremonies in honor of all those who for more than fifteen years have worked and planned to make what was only a dream something actual and visible in our beloved city. This fine

²⁴ *Fairmont Sentinel*, 10 November 1925.

²⁵ *Fairmont Sentinel*, 23 April 1926

²⁶ Theodore Lang to George McMasters, 23, 26 April, 1 May 1926. *Fairmont Sentinel*, 26 February 1926.

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structure will stand in this excellent location in our growing city, as a representative of that great system, unequalled in any other nation of the world. It will stand as a continuous reminder . . . of how great is our government in its splendid free institutions.²⁷

In the cornerstone, officials placed a copper box containing photographs of post office employees, a list of Fairmont postmasters, a history of the city, and a copy of the anniversary edition of the *Fairmont Sentinel*.²⁸

When construction ended, the community hosted a formal dedication, attended by Congressman Frank Clague and other dignitaries. During a brief open house, more than two thousand visitors peered through the doors. The interior design included rows of locked mailboxes, window space for clerks, plus a new feature that captivated the local newspaper. For postal inspectors, a "secret lookout" offered a way to observe operations without notice. The reporter asked,

Have you looked at the interior of the new post office? Notice that elevated runway clear across the back with six little windows in it? That is put in all new post office buildings. It is where the inspector watches the force, and commands a view of every part of the office. None knows when the inspector comes. None knows when he is up there. He keeps the key to the place and he looks 'em over when' he pleases.²⁹

However, the building did not have the folksy ambiance of the old style post office, set amid cigars and notions. One older visitor complained, "No place to sit," leading the newspaper editor to humorously observe, "An inconsiderate government neglected to place convenient window seats or even rails about the lobby for the boys."³⁰

The newspaper's review was more favorable than that of the "old-timers." The *Sentinel* declared,

Despite the critics, the new post office is going to be a peach. There is a small lobby at the entrance and as the customer enters he will be face to face with the parcel post window, a large wide one. Letters will be mailed nearby to the left with the money order window at the left. Postmaster Merry has a fine office in the northwest corner, in which a huge safe is now being installed.

The big windows make the interior of the building as light as day. The elevated runway where inspectors can keep an eye on the force when desired has been fitted with shutters. Entrance to it is provided by an iron ladder from the basement. Lock boxes will be on the south, east and west of the lobby.

The post office isn't as big as a skyscraper, but it is as big as Fairmont will need for some years and the town could stand several more buildings as well built and furnished.³¹

²⁷ *Fairmont Sentinel*, 26 February 1926.

²⁸ *Fairmont Sentinel*, 23 February 1925. There was a final dispute between Lang and Combs after completion of the project, when the government representative complained that the brick did not meet specifications.

²⁹ *Fairmont Sentinel*, 4 May 1926.

³⁰ *Fairmont Sentinel*. 30 July 1926.

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The post office occupied the new building on July 29, 1926. Under postal classifications, Fairmont became one of twenty "first-class" post offices in Minnesota, joining Albert Lea, Austin, Bemidji, Crookston, Duluth, Faribault, Fergus Falls, Hibbing, Mankato, Minneapolis, Owatonna, Red Wing, Rochester, St. Cloud, St. Paul, South St. Paul, Stillwater, Virginia, and Winona.³²

The Fairmont Post Office remained in use until 2001 when it was sold.

Summary

The Fairmont United States Post Office served as a center for the community during a period of economic expansion. Following the introduction and expansion of the parcel post service, the local post office shipped millions of dollars of agricultural goods throughout the region, while bringing urban consumer goods to the doorsteps of small town residents. As a prominent and substantial federal building with regular patronage from local citizens, it solidified the development of a new downtown commercial district on North Avenue.

³¹ *Fairmont Sentinel*, 24 June 1926.

³² *Fairmont Sentinel*, 22 May 1926. This is not to be confused with the construction classifications.

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10. Geographical Data

Verbal Boundary Description

Lying and being in Fairmont, Minnesota, fronting approximately one hundred and three and ninetenths feet (103.9') on the east side of North Avenue, and extending eastwardly, of that width, along the north side of Blue Earth Avenue, one hundred and fifty feet (150'), to the twenty-foot public alley bounding said site on the east; being all of lots six (6) and seven (7), block thirty (30), in the original plat of the village (now city) of Fairmont.

Boundary Justification

The nominated property includes the entire parcel historically associated with the United States Post Office, Fairmont.

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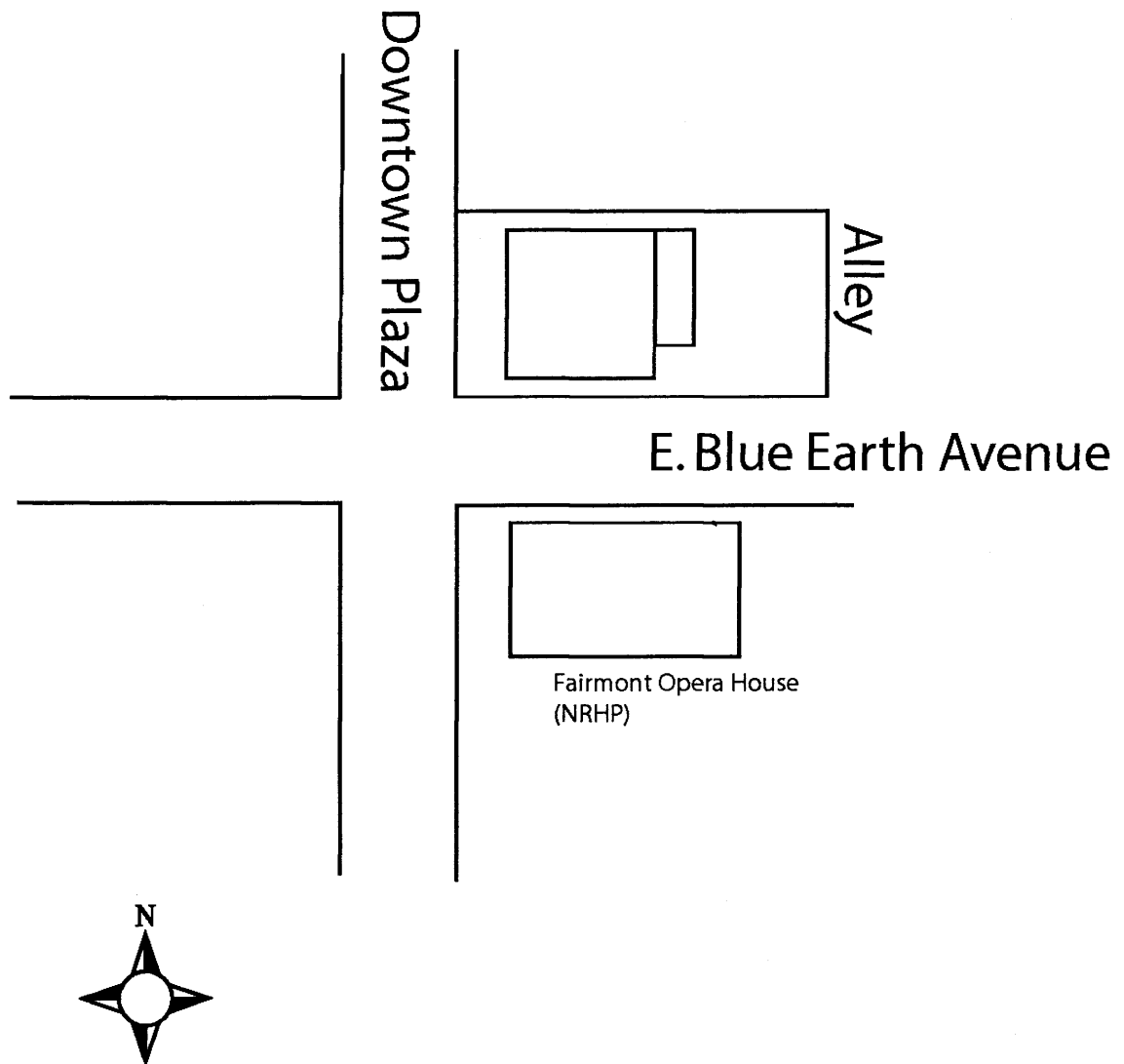
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Site Map



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Photographs

1. View to northeast at corner of E. Blue Earth Avenue and Downtown Plaza. Daniel Hoisington, photographer, June 2007.
2. View to southeast. Daniel Hoisington, photographer, June 2007.
3. View to northeast. E. Blue Earth Avenue in foreground. Steven Pierce, photographer, August 2007.
4. View to west. Steven Pierce, photographer, August 2007.
5. View to southwest. Daniel Hoisington, photographer, June 2007.
6. View to southeast. Detail of balusters and doorway. Daniel Hoisington, photographer, June 2007.
7. Interior view of original vault. Steven Pierce, photographer, August 2007.
8. Historic view, 1926. Negative in possession of Steven Pierce.
9. Architectural drawing. West elevation.