

1659

# 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" in the appropriate box 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 Lassen County Court House

other names/site number \_\_\_\_\_

### 2. Location

street & number Courthouse Square NA  not for publication

city or town Susanville NA  vicinity

state California code CA county Lassen code 035 zip code 96130

### 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.)

James Alveyta Deputy 12-5-97  
 Signature of certifying official/Title Date  
State Historic Preservation Officer  
 State of 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 commenting 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 H. Beall 1/23/98  
 Signature of the Keeper Date of Action

**5. Classification**

**Ownership of Property**  
(Check as many boxes as apply)

**Category of Property**  
(Check only one box)

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

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

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

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	0	buildings
0	0	sites
0	0	structures
0	0	objects
1	0	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**

N/A

0

**6. Function or Use**

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

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

Government: courthouse

Government: courthouse

**7. Description**

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

**Materials**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

Classical Revival

foundation Concrete  
walls Sandstone  
roof Concrete  
other

**Narrative Description**

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



10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property Approx. 1.5

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

1	<u>1 0 6 9 8 3 2 0</u>	<u>4 4 7 6 4 0 0</u>	2	_____	_____	_____
	Zone Easting	Northing		Zone Easting	Northing	
3	_____	_____	4	_____	_____	_____

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 Stephen D. Mikesell / David S. Byrd

organization JRP Historical Consulting Services date February 8, 1997

street & number 1477 Drew Avenue, Suite 105 telephone (916) 757 - 2521

city or town Davis state CA zip code 95616

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 Lassen County

street & number 221 South Roop Street telephone (916)251-8333

city or town Susanville state CA zip code 96130

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.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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## Section 7

## SUMMARY DESCRIPTION

The Lassen County Court House<sup>1</sup> is a two-story reinforced concrete building faced in stone masonry with a full basement and partial third story. It was constructed at this site in 1917. The building is roughly rectangular, measuring about 124' x 64'. The building is built on a concrete foundation with concrete block or hollow clay tile walls faced in native stone and extensive terra-cotta ornamentation. Architecturally, the building is best understood as a Beaux Arts Classical Revival civic building, with a strong Doric Order entry pavilion and flanking wings. The building is richly detailed with terra cotta ornamentation on the exterior as well as the interior. It is situated at the center of a two-acre Court House Square. Although it has been modified to some degree through the years, the building retains a very high degree of integrity, interior as well as exterior, to its appearance during its period of significance.

## SETTING, LOCATION

The Lassen County Court House is located in the two-acre Court House Square, bounded by Court, Mill, South Roop and South Lassen streets. The square is near the historic core of the city of Susanville, just south of the main commercial district, in an area used for residential, office, and commercial purposes. The Court House Square includes four buildings, one of which is the subject court house. A second building is a two-story masonry jail, built at this site in 1911; this building is situated just south of the court house and is currently vacant. A third building is a two-story concrete jail, built in 1970 but currently unused. The fourth building is a two-story Courthouse Annex Building, constructed in the mid-1960s. The 1970 jail and Courthouse Annex are situated east of the court house. To the north and east of the court house are areas of open lawn. The lawn is bordered by a low retaining wall on Mill, South Lassen, and Court streets. Stairs and walkways cross the lawn leading to the entrance of the court house. An asphalt parking lot covers the area east between the court house and the 1970 jail and Courthouse Annex. The subject of this nomination is the court house, lawns, walkways, stairs, and retaining wall; the nomination does not include any of the other three buildings within the Court House Square, nor does it include the parking lots behind buildings.

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<sup>1</sup> From its initial planning this building has been referred to as "court house" rather than the conventional spelling "courthouse." This nomination uses this historic designation.

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## EXTERIOR ELEMENTS

The court house is an essentially flat-roofed building, two stories high with a full basement and a partial third story. The building was built of reinforced concrete post and beam construction, with concrete slab floors and a concrete slab roof. The basement is partially below grade; the first story stands about five feet above grade. The roof is not truly flat; shallow slopes are provided on the three major roof elements to promote drainage; the roof slopes are hidden behind a small parapet, creating the appearance of a flat roof. The color and texture of the building are defined by three visible materials: the gray-tan native stone, which is used as a veneer on all elevations<sup>2</sup>; the architectural terra-cotta, most of which is a natural tan, or terra cotta, color; and the concrete foundation, which has been covered in stucco tinted the color of the terra cotta.

In its exterior details, the court house is a handsome but restrained Classical Revival building, dominated by a central Doric Order portico and by terra cotta ornamentation on the entablature above the columns and in a belt course below the cornice. The building's facade (its east elevation) is shown in **Photograph 1**. The facade is symmetrical, with a tall entry pavilion and identical flanking wings, each slightly shorter than the pavilion. The entry pavilion is accessed via tall concrete steps, as well as a handicapped access ramp, installed to the right (north) in the early 1980s. The original landing at the entrance to the building was somewhat different than it is today; this modification is discussed below under "Discussion of Integrity."

The focus of the facade is the colonnaded entry pavilion. The columns, shown in **Photograph 2**, are faced in architectural terra cotta and stand about twenty feet high. The columns include fluted shafts, simple Doric capitals, and no bases. The colonnade is surrounded by terra cotta including a highly decorative entablature. The frieze includes an inscription, "Lassen County Court House" in terra cotta letters, with Doric triglyphs and metopes at either side of the inscription. The terra cotta cornice includes repetitive patterns of gargoyle faces, alternating with floriated motifs. The entablature is shown in **Photograph 3**. A wide terra cotta belt course extends across the facade (and the other elevations as well), about two feet below the cornice. The belt course, shown in **Photograph 4**, features acanthus details, alternating with frets (or Greek keys) and egg figures.

The wall behind the colonnade is finished in terra cotta to look like cut stone. Entry to the building is gained through double doors; these doors are metal frame with large glass panes, and are not original to the building being added in about 1990 replacing an early set of replacement doors. Small window openings exist at either side of the double doors. Very tall fixed windows exist above the door and small window openings, sheltered behind a diamond-pattern metal grillwork. The entry is illustrated in **Photograph 5**.

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<sup>2</sup> This stone was quarried in Susanville, a few miles from the building. It appears to be a gray sandstone. The quarry at Susanville was not a major producer; it was not discussed in the encyclopedic study, "The Structural and Industrial Materials of California," Bulletin No. 38, California State Mining Bureau, 1906.

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As noted, the colonnade is accessed by raised steps. The stairway and landing are concrete, with decorative recessed panels on the sides, as shown in **Photograph 6**. Older steps and metal railings exist on the front and left sides of the landing; on the right side, a gently-sloping handicapped access ramp was installed in the early 1980s. As discussed under "Discussion of Integrity" below, the stairway and landing have been modified since this building was constructed.

Six windows exist on each of the side wings, three at each story. The sash are aluminum frame replacement windows; all windows in the building were replaced with inappropriate aluminum-framed sash in the late 1970s or early 1980s. First story windows throughout the building include original terra cotta window surrounds, as shown in **Photograph 7**. Second story windows have no surrounds but do have terra cotta sills. The original windows were steel casements with transoms.<sup>3</sup>

The north elevation, shown in **Photograph 8**, includes five windows (three on the second story, two on the first) as well as a door to the basement. The south elevation, shown in **Photograph 9**, is similar to the north; the two differ in that the south elevation includes a modern shed-roofed shelter for the basement entry and a prominent exterior-mounted air-conditioning unit.

At the rear, the central segment (defined by the pavilion at the facade) extends beyond the plane of the side wings, as shown in **Photograph 10**. At the rear, the fenestration on the side wings is the same as at the facade, including terra cotta surrounds at the first story windows. First story windows of the central segment are also the same as on the side wings of the facade. The second story of the rear central segment, however, is unique, owing to the fact that this is the courtroom area. The courtroom was fitted with very tall window openings, nearly twice as tall as other windows on the building. These windows are also aluminum frame replacements.

The open lawn areas on the north and east sides of the court house are bounded by a low retaining wall constructed of the same material as the walls of the court house. The wall extends from a driveway on Mill Street around South Lassen Street to an asphalt ramp that extends in front of the 1911 jail on Court Street. Both the ramp and driveway lead to the parking lot behind the court house. The retaining wall is broken by two stairways, one on South Lassen Street directly east of the main entrance and one at the corner of Mill and South Lassen streets. The stairway on South Lassen leads to a broad walkways that crosses the lawn to the main entrance of the court house. A flagpole and several historic markers and monuments are located about midway up this walkway. The stairway on the corner of Mill Street and South Lassen Street extends diagonally across the lawn in the general direction of the main

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<sup>3</sup> The original plans call for "patented casement (opens horizontally)." These plans, dated July 3, 1915, are on file in the office of the Public Works Director, Lassen County, in Susanville.

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entrance to the court house. The wall and original walkways were built by the county between 1917 and 1919. A new walkway was added in the early 1980s to link the original walkways to the ramp. The lawn, wall, stairs, and walkways are shown in **Photographs 11, 12, and 13.**

## INTERIOR ELEMENTS

As noted, the court house is a two-story building with a full basement. The first story includes a large ceremonial lobby as well as office space. The second story is chiefly occupied by the courtroom, but includes the judges chambers and office space as well. The basement includes office space and various storage rooms. A small third story exists atop the central segment, i.e. above the entry pavilion, and includes the law library and jury room. The architectural character of the interior is defined chiefly by two grand spaces: the entry lobby and the courtroom.

The entry lobby occupies the eastern half of the central segment, rising to the equivalent of two stories. A general view of this lobby is shown in **Photograph 14.** The area is lit by the tall windows with grills, which dominate the colonnade area at the facade. Symmetrical staircases rise at either side of the lobby, leading to the second story. The principal doorway is framed by an elaborate surround, with pilasters and a large entablature. The surround is shown in detail in **Photograph 15.** The pilaster ornamentation is built around urn forms while the frieze includes floriated figures, in the classic Greek honeysuckle pattern. The cornice appears to include an acanthus pattern. The cornice is surmounted by an elaborate series of details; a very large cartouche at the center, with torch figures at either side, connected with scrollwork.

As noted, the lobby is open on its eastern half. The ceiling of the lobby is supported on heavy beams, faced in wood.<sup>4</sup> A wide terra cotta cornice, or ceiling molding, rings the lobby ceiling, in a cartouche and scrollwork pattern, along with a dentil course and an egg-and-dart pattern at the cornice. Carved brackets link the beams with the ceiling molding; the ceiling is shown in detail in **Photograph 16.** A large, original chandelier lights this room. At the top of the double stairs (at the second story), there exists a hallway. This hallway is open to the lobby, creating a loggia with three openings to the lobby. Each opening is partially screened by a masonry balustrade, as shown in **Photograph 17.** The center opening is the most detailed of the three, including the seal of the State of California at the center of the balustrade. The balusters are of the same pattern as those on the stairways. The flooring in the lobby is terrazzo.

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<sup>4</sup> It is not known whether these beams are structural wood or a wooden veneer over structural concrete. The original plans indicate that the beams are wooden but the extraordinary spans suggest that the wood may be a veneer. The original plans do not always conform with the "as built" conditions.



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The stairs in the lobby are of marble with terra cotta balusters and newel posts. The newel posts, which also serve as bases for planters, are among the most richly detailed elements of the building, decorated with a busy collection of symbols, including American flag symbols, acanthus leaves, and scrollwork. The balusters and rails are also highly detailed, decorated with appears to be a carved honeysuckle pattern.

At the rear of the lobby, three arched openings provide access to a hallway and to the office spaces that occupy most of the first story. The ceiling of the hallway has been dropped and heating and air-conditioning ductwork installed behind the dropped ceiling, as shown in **Photograph 18**. The first story hallway is correspondingly truncated, i.e. partially hidden by the dropped ceiling, as shown in **Photograph 19**. The original ceiling is likely in place but hidden from public view. The county office spaces at the first story retain few visible original features; these may exist behind the partitions and dropped ceilings. A typical first story space is shown in **Photograph 20**.

The second story retains a much higher degree of integrity than the first. A long central hallway connects all second story rooms. The hallway includes terrazzo flooring, similar to that used in the lobby. The original ceiling is intact in this hallway, as shown in **Photograph 21**. The courtroom, the most important space from a functional and architectural standpoint, is accessed from doors directly behind the loggia. Highly decorative door surrounds denote this important entry.

The courtroom itself is one of the most richly detailed and least modified historic rooms to be found anywhere in California. **Photograph 22** offers a general view of this room. The room is so replete with architectural features as to defy brief description. Among the most notable features are: pilasters along the wall; the cornice ceiling molding; carved ceiling beams; door surrounds; and a large tablet on the rear wall, centered behind the judge's bench.

The pilasters, molding, and ceiling beams are shown in detail in **Photograph 23**. The molding and beams incorporated dentil course and egg-and-dart decorations, commonly found throughout the interior of the building. The pilaster capitals also include an egg-and-dart motif. Also shown in **Photograph 20** is a chandelier, which appears to be original to the room. A typical door surround is shown in **Photograph 24**; also shown in that photograph are original wall sconces. The door surrounds repeat the egg-and-dart motif, as well as the elaborate brackets and frieze, found elsewhere in this room. The tablet, which may be seen in **Photograph 19**, includes the quotation, "Let justice here her court maintain, each suitor's cause with fairness hear, here hold her scales in equal poise, sans prejudice, sans fear." (Attributed to Julian E. Pardee, an early judge in Lassen County.) In addition to structural and architectural elements, the courtroom retains very old furniture, including the bench. The bench includes a very old light standard, visible in **Photograph 22**.

Outside the courtroom, the second story retains many original features, although none match the courtroom in architectural detail. A niche-like drinking fountain is located just outside the courtroom; it may be seen at the left of **Photograph 21**. The ceiling molding and pilaster treatment beyond the courtroom area is much simpler, as shown in **Photograph 25**.

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The basement level of the building is largely unmodified. This was a largely utilitarian space from the outset, built for miscellaneous storage but occupied by the county library shortly after the building was constructed. A typical view of the basement hallway is shown in **Photograph 26**. The partial third story area was built as a jury room and is still used for that function as well as a law library.

**DISCUSSION OF INTEGRITY**

On balance, the Lassen County Court House retains a very high degree of integrity. Numerous modifications are relatively unimportant when considered against the scale of the building and the amount of original character-defining elements that remain.

The most notable modification is not distinguishable except when comparing the existing facade with historic photographs. **Figure 1** is a copy of a photograph taken of the building by Frederick Gundrum in October 1926. The original entry to the building included a broad landing, extending across the facade, with a baluster at the outer edge of the landing. This entry was rebuilt at some point after 1926 but not in the recent past; the date of this work is not recorded in the records of the county but is beyond the memory of current county employees. It appears that the current landing at the entry to the building is original; the modification involved removal of the landing at the side wings. The stairs and entry were refinished at some time in the early 1980s and the handicap ramp was added a short time later.

Other than the aforementioned removal of the side wings of the landing and the addition of the ramp, the exterior of the building retains a very high degree of integrity. The most intrusive modification was replacement of the windows. As noted, the original windows were metal casements with transoms. The front door has also been replaced; the original door was a metal revolving door. Other exterior modifications are minor and easily reversible, such as the small shed-roofed shelters for the basement entries and hanging of air-conditioned equipment on the south elevation.

In its interior, the major modification was renovation of the first story office space, including installation of a dropped ceiling. It is likely that most (if not all) original architectural features are in place behind the new office space.

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## Section 8

## SUMMARY STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Lassen County Court House is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places at the local level of significance under Criteria A and C, in the areas of government and architecture. The period of significance extends from 1917 to 1947; the earlier year is the date of construction while the latter year is an arbitrary date, fifty years from the present, necessitated by the fact that the building does not appear to be exceptionally significant. Under Criterion A, the Court House is significant as the principal seat of government for Lassen County and as a powerful symbol of local authority in a sparsely-populated county. Under Criterion C, the Court House is significant in two respects: as an excellent example of the Classical Revival court house from the early 20th century; and as an important example of the work of a master designer, George C. Sellon, an active and important architect who practiced throughout Northern California in the first half of the 20th century. The building retains a very high degree of integrity to its appearance in 1917. Although some modifications have been made since 1917, many of these were made during the period of significance. On balance, the Court House retains a sufficiently high degree of integrity of location, setting, design, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association to warrant listing in the National Register.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Lassen County was created by the California legislature in 1864 (14 years after the state was admitted to the Union).<sup>1</sup> The center of the population, then and now, was the Honey Lake Valley, an agricultural district watered by the Susan River, which flows east from the Sierra Nevada and drains into Honey Lake. The population of this isolated region of California grew during the 1860s chiefly the area was a link in the wagon train route connecting California with the emerging gold mining districts of Idaho. The county retained a stable but modest population throughout the 19th and early 20th century, maintained by an economy based chiefly in agriculture and lumber.<sup>2</sup> Susanville, at the head of the Honey Lake Valley, was the original and present county seat.

<sup>1</sup> Owen C. Coy, *California County Boundaries: A Study of the Division of the State into Counties and The Subsequent Changes in their Boundaries* (Fresno: Valley Publishers, 1973), a reprint of the original 1923 book.

<sup>2</sup> The early history of the county is presented in several sources, including: William Newell Davis, *Sagebrush Corner: the Opening of California's Northeast* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1974); Asa Merrill Fairfield, *Fairfield's Pioneer History of Lassen County, California; Containing Everything That Can Be Learned About It from the Beginning of the World to the Year of Our Lord 1870* (San Francisco: H.S. Crocker, 1916.)

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The county set aside a court house square in Susanville and built a small court house in 1867.<sup>3</sup> The original court house was on the same site as the present structure. The original building was a two-story wood frame building. In 1911, the county built a stone masonry jail next to the original court house; that building still stands but is largely unused.

The civic leaders of Lassen County began to promote construction of new civic buildings during the first decade of the 20th century. The *Lassen Advocate*, a Susanville newspaper and the principal journal in the county, was particularly active in the campaign, which required a two-thirds affirmative vote of the citizenry to approve a bond measure. A typical exhortation by the editorial writer included the following:

One of the distinguishing marks of a truly loyal and progressive citizen is his pride in the public institutions of his town, county, state or nation. The picture of the proposed new court house herewith presented [the issue included an elevation view of the court house, as Sellon designed it] while not depicting an elaborate piece of architecture, presents a substantial and attractive appearance, and one that any citizen may well feel proud of. Do you want to see this building replace the old rattle-trap now designated as a courthouse, and which we all steer clear of when escorting visitors around our county seat? It is for you the voters of Lassen County to say.<sup>4</sup>

The bond measure was approved in June, 1915, generating funds for this building as well as a new county hospital. Obviously, the county had contracted with George C. Sellon to design the building prior to the election, because an elevation, signed by Sellon, appeared in the newspaper just before the election. The Board of Supervisors adopted Sellon's plans on April 16, 1915; Sellon also prepared the plans for the county hospital, which was approved in the same June, 1915 election.<sup>5</sup> In his plans for the court house, Sellon had developed the basic floor plan but had left open the question of the material for facing the walls, to allow the county to secure bids for different materials and select among these. Sellon's four options all involved use of "Dennison Interlocking Tile," presumed to be a patented building product, probably a concrete block or possibly a hollow clay tile product.<sup>6</sup> The *Lassen Advocate* was again instrumental in leading a public campaign to convince the Board of Supervisors to insist upon the use of a native stone veneer, specifically a stone that was quarried in Lassen County. The Board decided

<sup>3</sup> Fred S. Cook, *Legends of Lassen County* (California Traveler, Inc. 1970).

<sup>4</sup> *Lassen Advocate*, May 21, 1915.

<sup>5</sup> *Lassen Advocate*, April 16, 1915.

<sup>6</sup> *Lassen Advocate*, July 23, 1915. No reference has been located for the Dennison Interlocking Tile product. No mention is made of the product in the 1928 study of the ceramic industry in California, Waldemar Fenn Dietrich, "The Clay Resources and the Ceramic Industry of California," California Division of Mines and Mining, Bulletin No. 99, 1928. The name suggests it was a hollow clay tile product.

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in July 1915 to utilize native stone. In August, 1915, the contract was awarded to James L. McLaughlin, a contractor from San Francisco.<sup>7</sup> Robert Brodie was given a key sub-contract to handle the stone masonry work.

The building was completed and accepted in 1917. The building has functioned largely without change since its completion. The only major functional change was the relocation of the county library to a new building in the mid-1960s; the basement of the court house was originally used for that purpose. In addition, the County Board of Supervisors, which met in this building when it was constructed, moved to new chambers in the early 1970s. The building has not changed a great deal from a structural or architectural standpoint; the high degree of integrity of this building is discussed in Section 7, "Description."

**SIGNIFICANCE IN GOVERNMENT**

Each county court house in each county in the United States has played a role in the development of governmental institutions in that jurisdiction, in the legislative, administrative, and judicial branches alike. In a sense, historic significance may be assigned to practically any county court house in this respect. The court house has had disproportionate impact, however, in those chiefly rural counties in which there are few municipalities and the county is the dominant governmental institution. This has been the case in the relationship between the Lassen County Court House and the people of Lassen County, California, since construction of this building in 1917.

Lassen County is an isolated part of California, most of it (including Susanville) located east of the crest of the Sierra Nevada. Although its population has grown considerably in recent decades, it is now and has always been one of the least-populated counties in the state. There are only two governmental entities (excluding special districts) in the county: the City of Susanville and the County of Lassen. For the residents of the great bulk of the county, there is but one government, that being the county government.

Under these conditions, the Lassen County Court House has great functional importance, beyond what is the case in the more densely-settled part of the state. At the time this building was constructed, for example, the voting population of the county was only a few thousand people; the vote for the bonds to pay for this building was 944 to approve, 366 not to approve. Functionally, the court house served to consolidate the majority of the county government into one location. Prior to construction of the court house, many county government departments, including the District Attorney, Justice of the Peace, County Coroner, Public Administrator, and the Board of Supervisors, had either rented offices or no offices at all. All of these departments were provided space in the new building.<sup>8</sup> To an extent the new court house also made the county government more responsive to the needs of the populace. Prior to construction many of the departments most heavily relied upon on a day to day basis, including

<sup>7</sup> *Lassen Advocate*, August 20, 1915.

<sup>8</sup> *Lassen Advocate*, June 4, 1915; May 21, 1915.

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the County Assessor, Clerk, Auditor, Recorder, Treasurer, Surveyor, Tax Collector, and Superintendent of Schools, shared small offices in the 1867 court house building. In addition to the recognized fire hazard, by 1915 these cramped spaces made it nearly impossible for the departments to adequately perform their business. Although over time, especially since the 1960s, many of the county offices have relocated to nearby annexes, many of these important departments remain in the court house including the Record, County Clerk, Auditor, Assessor, Appraiser, and Treasury/Tax Collector.

The importance of the building in the area of government is both symbolic as well as functional. This symbolic value was identified in the previously-quoted editorial of the *Lassen Advocate*, which called upon the "truly loyal and progressive citizen" to approve a building that "presents a substantial and attractive appearance, and one that any citizen may well feel proud of." The county succeeded in this respect; the Lassen County Court House is an extraordinarily handsome court house, particularly within the context of small counties in California. This symbolic value has been maintained through the years.

**SIGNIFICANCE IN ARCHITECTURE; AS AN EXAMPLE OF A CLASSICAL REVIVAL COURT HOUSE**

The county court house represents a distinct property type, in California and elsewhere in the United States. As a pervasive symbol of local government, jurisprudence, and architecture, the court house has been analyzed and inventoried in many states across the nation, including New Mexico, Texas, Virginia, Massachusetts, Georgia, Washington state, New York, Nevada, and Louisiana and Oklahoma, as well as in several Canadian provinces.<sup>9</sup> Relatively few studies have been conducted, however, in California. This is a somewhat surprising fact, given that California is the most populous state and includes relatively few counties, at least on a per capita basis.<sup>10</sup> Although there are excellent studies of individual court houses in the state, the court house as a property type in California has not been treated to a full contextual analysis.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Many of these studies were conducted as part of statewide historic preservation plans, others by historical society, universities, and nonprofit organizations.

<sup>10</sup> There appear to be two general studies of the California courthouse. One, prepared by the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America, *Counties and Courthouses of California: A Survey*, 1964, is more a studies of the formation of counties than it is a cultural resource inventory of courthouses. The second, Larner & Larner Architects and Associates, *The American Courthouse: Northern and Central California Historic Courthouses* (Auburn, 1975), was prepared as a context in preparation of rehabilitation plans for the Placer County Court House in Auburn. It is nonetheless an excellent overview of courthouses in the north and central parts of the state and is used extensively in this overview.

<sup>11</sup> Individual histories have been prepared for the courthouses in Mariposa County, San Luis Obispo County, Placer County, and Santa Barbara County.

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Lassen County, California

The most useful overview of California court houses, particularly for court houses outside of Southern California, was a study of 45 northern and central California court houses, past and present, assembled by an architectural firm, Lardner & Lardner Architects and Associates. This firm conducted the study in the mid-1970s in preparation for rehabilitation of the Placer County Court House, one of the best-known such buildings in Northern California. In the Lardner & Lardner overview, these 45 court houses were analyzed as to architectural style, period of construction, and association with well-known architectural firms. The Lassen County Court House was included among this group, making this overview a useful point of origin in discussing the architectural significance of the this building.

The Lardner & Lardner study treats the early California court houses (all were built before 1925) as falling into six architectural "styles": Gold Rush Style; Gothic Revival Style; Classic Revival Style; Capitol Style; Romanesque Style; and Neo-Classical Style. While this categorization does not conform in all cases with the general architectural historical literature, it is nonetheless a useful treatment of the dominant groups of court houses in the northern half of the state. By "Gold Rush Style," the authors refer to the small, temple-like buildings constructed early in the life of the state; these buildings might as easily be classified as Greek Revival court houses. Very few of these buildings still remain. By Gothic Revival and Romanesque court houses, the authors refer to the small numbers of court houses executed in those fine arts revival styles; there are no remnants of either style. By "Capitol Style," the authors refer to the dozens of California court houses that included domes and column-and-pediment porticos, in the manner of the U.S. Capitol and the California State Capitol. More than a dozen such court houses were constructed, although many have since been demolished. The distinction between Classical Revival and Neo-Classical Revival appears to have more to do with the date of construction and size than with architectural detail. The Classical Revival buildings were described as having been built between 1850 and 1890, with the note that "Classical Revival court houses are generally smaller than those of the Capitol Style and have less imposing domes or cupolas." The "Neo-Classical Style" is identified as having been built 1900-1918, with the note that "The Neo-Classical court house imitates the Classical Revival Style and the Capitol Style and represents a modern cleaned up version of them. The major difference is that the imposing symbolic dome is gone. The Neo-Classical court house is a turning point for the dome, and the dome is a symbol of the past."<sup>12</sup> The Lassen County Court House is included among the six Neo-Classical Style court houses among the 45 court houses in the study, five of which are still in use. The other four extant examples are: Modoc County Court House (1914), the El Dorado County Court House (1912), Yolo County Court House (1917), and the Solano County Court House (1911).

The Lassen County Court House (as with the other identified as Neo-Classical in the Lardner & Lardner study) is perhaps better understood as a Beaux Arts Classical Revival building, drawing upon the popular forms and traditions of the Classical Revival of the early 20th century. The Beaux Arts movement was part of what Harold Kirker has called the American Architectural Renaissance, which he sees as a "late- nineteenth and early twentieth-century

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<sup>12</sup> Lardner-Lardner Architects, 1975. This publication is not paginated.

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Lassen County, California

reaction to the unrestrained picturesque quality of Victorian revivalism.”<sup>13</sup> The style is sometimes called Beaux Arts Classicism because so many practitioners, in California and elsewhere, were trained at the Ecole de Beaux Arts in Paris. The American desire for a return to the order of classical forms is generally attributed to the success of the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, in which both the City Beautiful Movement and the Beaux Arts Classicism revival are seen as taking root.<sup>14</sup> In California, the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco is seen as solidifying support locally for both City Beautiful and Beaux Arts Classicism ideals.<sup>15</sup> Beaux Arts Classicism would affect all types of buildings in California and elsewhere. The University of California campus in Berkeley, for example, was profoundly affected by it, as were countless commercial buildings throughout the state. The style was best adapted to civic architecture, however, and it is there that its impact was most felt.

The effect of Beaux Arts Classicism on the design of county court houses, is somewhat difficult to assess because there has always been a strong influence of Classical traditions in the design of such buildings. As seen in the Lardner & Lardner study, California county court houses have long been based on Classical traditions, drawing particularly upon the models of the U.S. Capitol and, to a lesser degree, the California Capitol. This tradition was surely based in the Classical Revival. County court houses were built on the Capitol model, even at a time in which Victorian revivalism was most popular in California. Although a few county court houses in California were designed in the popular late 19th century revival styles, most notably the Romanesque Revival court house in Santa Cruz, that style of design was the exception, not the rule.

The Beaux Art Classical Revival court house of the early 20th century, then, was a variation on a longstanding trend and was not a fundamentally new approach to the design of this building type. If there is a single characteristic that separates the Beaux Arts Classical Revival court house from its predecessor, it is the reliance upon Renaissance forms during the early 20th century to a far greater extent than during the 19th century. That reliance translates into a difference of proportions, with the early 20th century buildings wider in proportion to their height, unlike the 19th century example which attempted to replicate (or approximate) the proportions of Classical temples.

The Lassen County Court House is a significant example of the early 20th century Classical Revival court house. It is obviously important within the context of Lassen County; it is the only historic courthouse in the county and the only substantial Classical Revival building in the county. The building has been assessed as well for potential statewide significance; it does not appear to qualify on a statewide basis. As discussed, there are relatively few Beaux Arts Classical Revival court houses in California. The best examples are small buildings in rural counties:

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<sup>13</sup> Harold Kirker, *Old Forms on a New Land: California Architecture in Perspective* (Niwot, Colorado: Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 1991), 69.

<sup>14</sup> Kirker discusses the importance of the “Great White Way” of the Columbian Exposition in *California’s Architectural Frontier: Style and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century*. Salt Lake City: Peregrine-Smith Books, 1960.

<sup>15</sup> The importance of the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in the architectural history of the state is discussed in Kevin Starr, *Americans and the California Dream, 1850-1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973). Chapter 9 is dedicated to that issue.



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this building (1917); the Yolo County Court House in Woodland, also built in 1917, on plans by William Weeks; the Solano County Court House in Fairfield, built in 1911 on plans by E.C. Cummings and W.A. Jones. The Lardner & Lardner study also includes in this group the Mediterranean El Dorado County Court House in Placerville, built in 1912 on plans by Cuff and Diggs, although it is a far different building from the three mentioned. While it is a relatively rare example, it does not appear to represent an entity that is significant within the broader context of its property type in California.

In addition to being one of a small group of such buildings, the Lassen County Court House is significant in its own merit, as an important example of the Beaux Arts Classical Revival style. The building succeeds in the goals of the advocates of the style: to achieve the calming effect of Classical architecture while retaining the inspiring qualities of a civic building. In its exterior proportions and subdued use of architectural detail, the building is an excellent example of a civic building from the early 20th century; it is obviously inspired by Classical models but with a tasteful use of applied ornament. On the other hand, it would be a mistake to judge the building as plain or lacking in decorative detail. In its exterior and particularly in its interior, it is one of the more richly detailed court house buildings in California. The fact that virtually all of the applied decoration was made of terra cotta is itself representative of 20th century civic building design in California; terra cotta ornamentation was perhaps the most common architectural embellishment for civic buildings in the period in which this court house was built.<sup>16</sup>

**SIGNIFICANCE IN ARCHITECTURE; WORK OF A MASTER**

The Lassen County Court House was designed by George C. Sellon, an important Northern California architect from the turn of the century through his death in the early 1950s. Best-known as the first State Architect, Sellon was also a highly successful private architect who designed numerous well-known buildings in his hometown of Sacramento and in cities throughout Northern California.

George C. Sellon was born in San Francisco in 1881, the son of a railway mail clerk. In 1891, his family moved to Sacramento where his father worked for the Postal Telegraph Company. In 1894, the company transferred his father to their office in Chicago and it was in that city that Sellon received most of his education. George Sellon graduated from the Chicago Art Institute with a degree in architecture and, shortly after graduation, returned to California, setting up a practice in San Francisco.

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<sup>16</sup> The issue is addressed in Gary F. Kurtz, *Architectural Terra Cotta of Gladding, McBean* (Sausalito, California: Windgate Press, 1989). The ornamentation for the courthouse was almost certainly made by Gladding, McBean, a California-based company that sold architectural terra cotta around the world. The book lists the "principal architectural projects" of the company in California but does not list this building. Sellon, however, did use Gladding, McBean terra cotta in his design for a school in the company's hometown of Lincoln, California, as well as for the California State Life Insurance Building in Sacramento.

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Lassen County, California

In 1907, Sellon, at the age of 26, was appointed the first State Architect. The Bureau of Architecture (later the Division of Architecture, now the Office of the State Architect) was created by the Legislature in March 1907, chiefly to guide reconstruction of state-owned buildings that were damaged or destroyed in the 1906 earthquake in the San Francisco Bay Area.<sup>17</sup> While he would remain with the office for only a few years (he left the office before 1911), Sellon has the distinction of organizing the office and guiding its work during a period of great activity. Buildings attributed to the Sellon-led Bureau of Architecture include: San Quentin Prison, the first buildings at the Normal School in San Jose (San Jose State University), Agnews State Hospital, Napa State Hospital, and many others.<sup>18</sup>

After leaving the employment of the State of California, Sellon entered private practice in Sacramento and would remain active until shortly before his death in 1954.<sup>19</sup> During that long career, Sellon would design more than 100 buildings. Not surprisingly, the bulk of these were in the city of Sacramento, where Sellon designed some of the city's most important landmarks, including the California Almond Growers Exchange, the Bank of America Building, and the California Life Insurance Company Building at Plaza Park.

In his long private practice, Sellon was best known for his design of commercial buildings. He did design many civic buildings, however, during his tenure as State Architect and also while in private practice. Among his better-known buildings are two civic structures in Nevada City: the Nevada City City Hall and the Nevada County Court House. Both are Streamline Moderne/Art Deco buildings, indicating that Sellon was by no means wed to Beaux Arts design.

Sellon's career is seldom discussed in general surveys of California architectural history.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, he does appear to qualify as a local master designer, based upon the strength of his work in Sacramento and the rural counties of Northern California. The Lassen County Court House appears to be highly significant within the context of Sellon's career. It is arguably the best civic building he designed on his own; the aforementioned state-owned buildings were designed while he headed the Bureau of Architecture but were collaborative works, not attributable to Sellon alone. The Lassen County Court House is also the most richly detailed buildings he designed, rivaled only by the California Life Insurance Company building in this regard. Simply stated, the Lassen County Court House

<sup>17</sup> The history of this department is told in many locations; this summary was taken from California Department of Public Works, "First Biennial Report," November 1, 1922; Part VI, "Report of the Division of Architecture."

<sup>18</sup> California Department of Engineering, "Report of the State Engineer of the State of California, May 11, 1907 to November 30, 1908," *Appendix to the Journal of the Senate and Assembly*, 25th Session, Vol. 2, 1909.

<sup>19</sup> "George C. Sellon, Ex State Architect, Dies in Livermore," *Sacramento Bee*, October 14, 1954, page B:2.

<sup>20</sup> Kirker does not discuss him in either of his two overviews. Neither is he mentioned in Sally Woodbridge, *California Architecture* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1988). Two mentions are made of his work in David Gebhard, et al, *A Guide to Architecture in San Francisco & Northern California* (Santa Barbara and Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, Inc. 1973). That survey pays relatively little attention to Sacramento and the rural counties of Northern California. The two mentioned works are the City Hall and County Court House in Nevada City, both designed during the 1930s.

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appears to be either the most important building or the second most important building designed by George Sellon; this conclusion hinges on a judgement call regarding the importance of the California Life Insurance Company building and with the caveat that his career, which has been largely ignored in most works in California architectural history, deserve more research than it has received to date. Whether or not it is his most important accomplishment, this court house is certainly an outstanding landmark in the man's career.

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Lassen County, California****Section 10****VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION**

The boundary for this nomination includes the Lassen County Court House, the lawns, walkways, stairs, and retaining walls of Court House Square. The court house is sited near the center of Court House Square, a two-acre parcel near downtown Susanville; the boundaries are those shown on the attached site plan. This nomination concerns only the Lassen County Court House and open lawn areas, retaining wall, walkways, and stairs located to the east and north of the building; it does not include any other buildings within the Court House Square, nor does it include the asphalt parking lot behind the court house.

**BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION**

This nomination includes only the Lassen County Court House, open lawn areas, retaining wall, walkways, and stairs located east and north of the courthouse building. It does not include any of the other buildings in Court House Square. The justification for this restricted boundary is that none of the other buildings within the square were built at the time of the court house, and none conform architecturally or functionally with the court house. As discussed in Section 7, "Description," there are four buildings in the Court House Square: the 1917 court house, a 1911 jail, a 1970 jail, and a ca. 1980 court house annex. The square as a whole is dominated by buildings other than the court house, buildings that were built before or after the court house and which do not together comprise a compatible group of buildings that could be nominated together. Only the court house, original walkways, and retaining wall were built in 1917 or shortly thereafter. These features alone reflect the architectural character of that time. For this reason the boundary is restricted to that of the building, open lawn areas, walkways, stairs, and retaining wall.

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1. Lassen County Court House
2. Lassen County, California
3. David S. Byrd, JRP Historical Consulting Services
4. January 15, 1997
5. JRP Historical Consulting Services
6. Facade, camera facing southwest
7. #1

1. Lassen County Court House
2. Lassen County, California
3. David S. Byrd, JRP Historical Consulting Services
4. January 15, 1997
5. JRP Historical Consulting Services
6. Columns, camera facing northwest
7. #2

1. Lassen County Court House
2. Lassen County, California
3. David S. Byrd, JRP Historical Consulting Services
4. January 15, 1997
5. JRP Historical Consulting Services
6. Entablature at colonnade, camera facing west.
7. #3

1. Lassen County Court House
2. Lassen County, California
3. David S. Byrd, JRP Historical Consulting Services
4. January 15, 1997
5. JRP Historical Consulting Services
6. Belt course at facade, camera facing west
7. #4

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1. Lassen County Court House
2. Lassen County, California
3. David S. Byrd, JRP Historical Consulting Services
4. January 15, 1997
5. JRP Historical Consulting Services
6. Main entry, camera facing west
7. #5

1. Lassen County Court House
2. Lassen County, California
3. David S. Byrd, JRP Historical Consulting Services
4. January 15, 1997
5. JRP Historical Consulting Services
6. Stairway at main entry, camera facing north
7. #6

1. Lassen County Court House
2. Lassen County, California
3. David S. Byrd, JRP Historical Consulting Services
4. January 15, 1997
5. JRP Historical Consulting Services
6. Typical first story window surround, camera facing south
7. #7

1. Lassen County Court House
2. Lassen County, California
3. David S. Byrd, JRP Historical Consulting Services
4. January 15, 1997
5. JRP Historical Consulting Services
6. North elevation, camera facing southwest
7. #8

1. Lassen County Court House
2. Lassen County, California
3. David S. Byrd, JRP Historical Consulting Services
4. January 15, 1997
5. JRP Historical Consulting Services
6. South elevation, camera facing northwest
7. #9



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1. Lassen County Court House
2. Lassen County, California
3. David S. Byrd, JRP Historical Consulting Services
4. January 15, 1997
5. JRP Historical Consulting Services
6. Rear elevation, camera facing east
7. #10

1. Lassen County Court House
2. Lassen County, California
3. David S. Byrd, JRP Historical Consulting Services
4. January 15, 1997
5. JRP Historical Consulting Services
6. Retaining wall and lawn areas, camera facing south
7. #11

1. Lassen County Court House
2. Lassen County, California
3. David S. Byrd, JRP Historical Consulting Services
4. January 15, 1997
5. JRP Historical Consulting Services
6. Retaining wall and lawn areas, camera facing west
7. #12

1. Lassen County Court House
2. Lassen County, California
3. David S. Byrd, JRP Historical Consulting Services
4. January 15, 1997
5. JRP Historical Consulting Services
6. General view Court House, retaining walls, and lawn areas, camera facing north
7. #13

1. Lassen County Court House
2. Lassen County, California
3. David S. Byrd, JRP Historical Consulting Services
4. January 15, 1997
5. JRP Historical Consulting Services
6. General view of lobby, camera facing northeast
7. #14

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1. Lassen County Court House
2. Lassen County, California
3. David S. Byrd, JRP Historical Consulting Services
4. January 15, 1997
5. JRP Historical Consulting Services
6. Door surround, lobby, camera facing northeast
7. #15

1. Lassen County Court House
2. Lassen County, California
3. David S. Byrd, JRP Historical Consulting Services
4. January 15, 1997
5. JRP Historical Consulting Services
6. Ceiling of lobby, camera facing southeast
7. #16

1. Lassen County Court House
2. Lassen County, California
3. David S. Byrd, JRP Historical Consulting Services
4. January 15, 1997
5. JRP Historical Consulting Services
6. Loggia in lobby, camera facing southwest
7. #17

1. Lassen County Court House
2. Lassen County, California
3. David S. Byrd, JRP Historical Consulting Services
4. January 15, 1997
5. JRP Historical Consulting Services
6. Dropped ceiling and ductwork, first story, camera facing west
7. #18

1. Lassen County Court House
2. Lassen County, California
3. David S. Byrd, JRP Historical Consulting Services
4. January 15, 1997
5. JRP Historical Consulting Services
6. Hallway, first story, camera facing north
7. #19

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1. Lassen County Court House
2. Lassen County, California
3. David S. Byrd, JRP Historical Consulting Services
4. January 15, 1997
5. JRP Historical Consulting Services
6. Typical office space, first story, camera facing northeast
7. #20

1. Lassen County Court House
2. Lassen County, California
3. David S. Byrd, JRP Historical Consulting Services
4. January 15, 1997
5. JRP Historical Consulting Services
6. Hallway, second story, camera facing north
7. #21

1. Lassen County Court House
2. Lassen County, California
3. David S. Byrd, JRP Historical Consulting Services
4. January 15, 1997
5. JRP Historical Consulting Services
6. General view of courtroom, camera facing southwest
7. #22

1. Lassen County Court House
2. Lassen County, California
3. David S. Byrd, JRP Historical Consulting Services
4. January 15, 1997
5. JRP Historical Consulting Services
6. Pilasters, molding, and ceiling beams, courtroom, camera facing southeast
7. #23

1. Lassen County Court House
2. Lassen County, California
3. David S. Byrd, JRP Historical Consulting Services
4. January 15, 1997
5. JRP Historical Consulting Services
6. Door surround, courtroom, camera facing south
7. #24

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1. Lassen County Court House
2. Lassen County, California
3. David S. Byrd, JRP Historical Consulting Services
4. January 15, 1997
5. JRP Historical Consulting Services
6. Typical view, second story hallway beyond courtroom area, camera facing south
7. #25

1. Lassen County Court House
2. Lassen County, California
3. David S. Byrd, JRP Historical Consulting Services
4. January 15, 1997
5. JRP Historical Consulting Services
6. Basement area, camera facing east
7. #26

1. Lassen County Court House
2. Lassen County, California
3. Frederick Gundrum
4. October 1926
5. California State Library, California Room
6. Historic view of Lassen County Court House, camera facing northwest
7. Figure #1

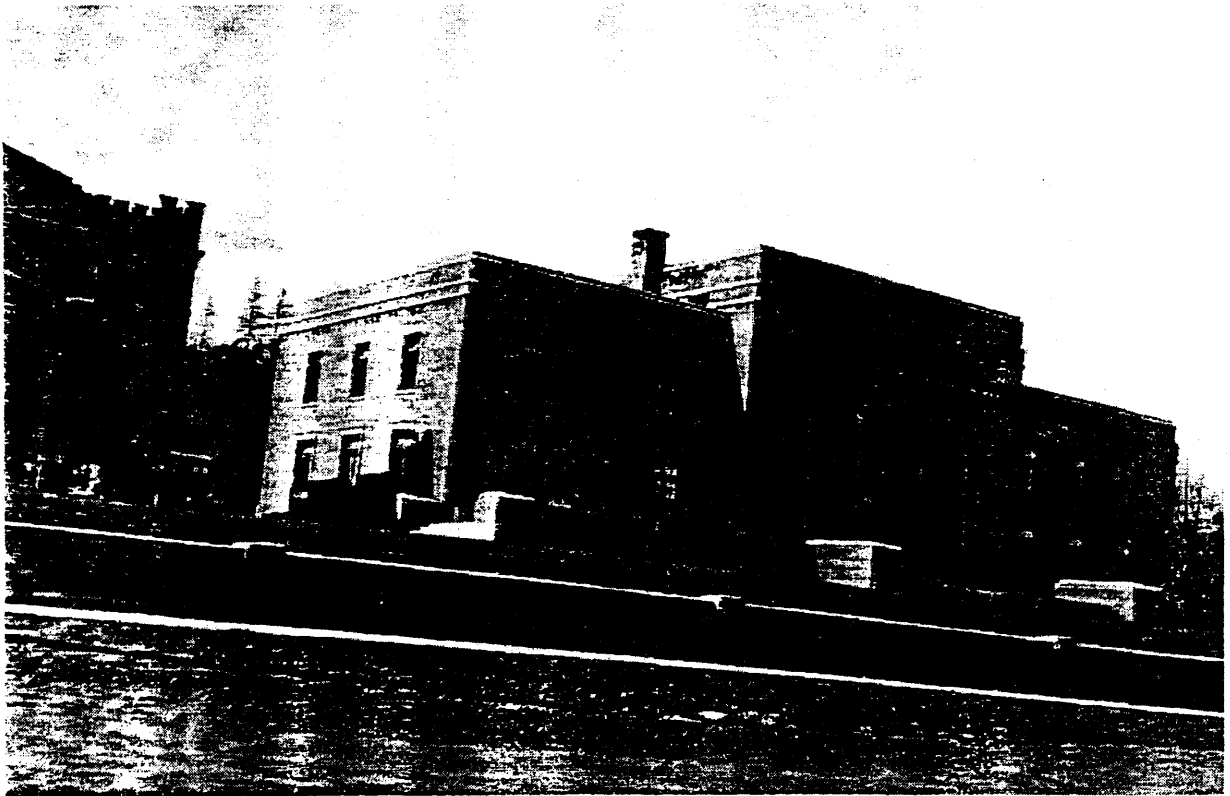
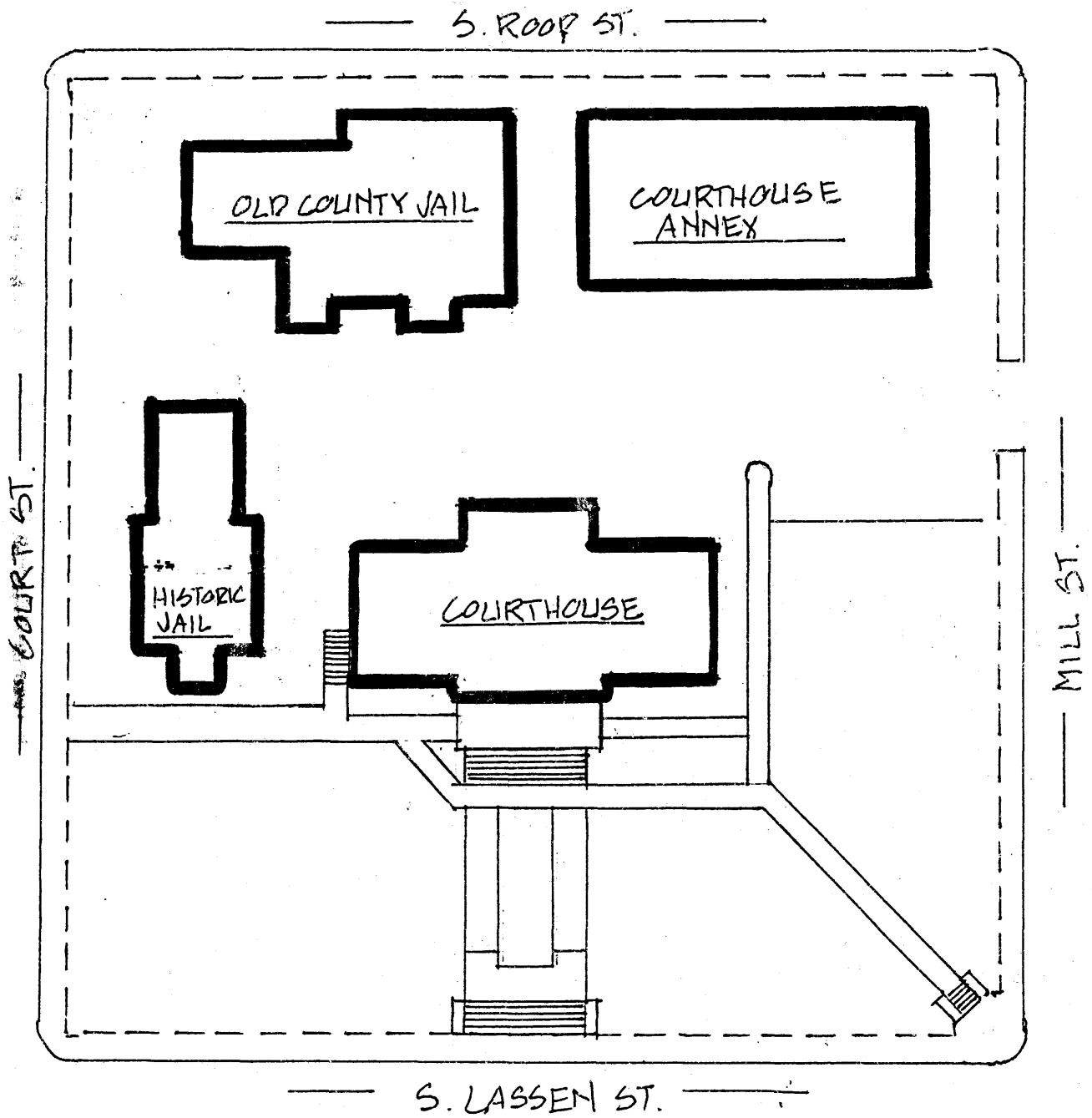


Figure 1. Historic view of Court House

*Lassen County Court House  
Lassen County, California*



Sketch Map: Courthouse Square  
Not To Scale