

Parcel #: 11-119-02
Acreage: Less than one acre.
Location: 117 South Virginia Street
Street: Court Street and South Virginia Street
City: Reno State: Nevada County: Washoe

Current Owner: Washoe County
Address: 117 South Virginia Street, Reno, Nevada 89501

Data Prepared by: Rainshadow Associates Date: 07/06/83
Address: P.O. Box 352, Carson City, Nevada 89702

Property Information

Original Use: Courthouse
Present Use: Courthouse
Condition: Fair
Architect: Frederick J. DeLongchamps
Builder: Sellman Brothers
Construction/Modification Dates: 1909-11/1946, 1949, 1963
Building Type: Public

Physical Description

The Washoe County Courthouse is Classical Revival with Beaux Arts influence. The 1909-11 portion is a two-storied, stone clad building. Its five bay facade (east side) is articulated by pilasters. The building rests on a rough cut granite block foundation with full basement. The outstanding feature is the central Corinthian portico with paired end columns and two central columns. Pilasters reflect this arrangement of columns in the portico's recessed facade. The portico soffit is enriched with pressed tin panels. Eleven granite steps rise from street level to the portico floor.

Windows are double hung, either one-over-one or multi-light-over-one, with terra cotta surrounds. The first story end bay windows are pedimented with brackets and projecting sills. Second story end bay windows are topped with a hood-mold with a central keystone. The roofline is enriched by a highly decorated terra cotta entablature consisting of a projecting cornice enlivened by a foliated relief, a dentil course, a frieze, and a multiple fascia architrave. The building is crowned with a copper dome with ribs ending in fanciful brackets. Four evenly spaced pedimented windows pierce the dome.

The Courthouse has been enlarged three times since 1910. The first two additions were the north wing (1946) and the south wing (1949). These terra cotta clad additions are nearly identical to the 1910 structure with compatible ornamentation. The ponderous, unornamented modern addition was built in 1963. The 1963 addition is clearly distinguishable from the original structure and does not detract from the integrity of the structure's major design elements.

Through the front (Virginia Street) central doorway is the entrance hall with a decorative, multi-color tile floor and exposed beam ceiling. The interior walls are divided horizontally by grey marble wainscoting with a black base and vertically by pilasters. The entrance hall contains two flat marble columns. To the left of the entrance is a staircase with a foliated metal newel post, marble treads, and iron risers leading to the second floor.

The second floor hall is enriched by a magnificent stained glass dome divided into eight sections by wooden ribs. Directly across from the stairway are double doors opening into a courtroom with high relief ornamentation. The wall behind the judge's seat is highlighted with a centrally placed, segmental arch with keystone supported by columns and flanked by pilasters ornamented with garlands. A design in molded pilaster embellishes the cove ceiling.

Statement of Significance (Criteria A, C)

The Washoe County Courthouse is significant as an intact example of the formal, Beaux Arts design characteristic of the early work of Nevada architect, Frederic J. DeLongchamps. The structure is also significant for its historical associations with the political development of Washoe County and the development of Reno's early 20th century divorce industry.

The present building is the third courthouse constructed in Washoe County and the second courthouse to occupy the North Virginia Street site. The building was constructed in 1910-11 at a cost of \$250,000.00. The Classical Revival style building was the first solo commission of the prolific Nevada architect, Frederic J. DeLongchamps, who practiced from 1907 to 1965. Please refer to the nomination cover form for a detailed discussion of DeLongchamps' work.

The Washoe County Courthouse, which has been in continuous use since its construction, is also significant for its role in the early 20th century Nevada divorce industry. The first divorce decree granted in Nevada was issued on November 5, 1859, while Nevada was still part of the Utah Territory. From 1859 until the turn-of-the-century, there were relatively few divorces in the State. However, Nevada's early liberalization of divorce residency requirements attracted a significant temporary population during the first four decades of the 20th century. In November 1928, Max Stern of the Pittsburgh Press estimated that divorce-seeking visitors to Reno spent over \$5 million a year. In 1931, 4,800 divorce decrees were granted in northern Nevada, the majority of which were processed through the Washoe County Courthouse.

Bibliography

Nylen, Robert A., "Reno's Premier Architect," Heritage Herald, May/June 1983, pp. 4-5.

Official Bicentennial Book, Ed. Stanley W. Paher, "Dude Ranches in Nevada." (State of Nevada, 1976), pp. 118-119.

Legal Description: Area bounded by South Virginia Street on the east, Court Street on the south, on the west by South Sierra Street, and on the north by the Riverside Hotel property.

Location of Legal Description : Washoe County Courthouse, 117 South Virginia St., Reno, Nevada 89501

Representation in Existing Surveys: Reno Cultural Resources Survey, 1983, Local survey deposited at the Division of Historic Preservation & Archeology, Carson City, NV

UTMReferences: Zone 11 E 258750 N 4378450.