

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

2242  
NOV 28 1989

### National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, styles, materials, and areas of significance, enter only the categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900a). Type all entries.

#### 1. Name of Property

historic name Phelps County Courthouse  
other names/site number PP04-13

#### 2. Location

street & number 5th Ave bet East & West Aves N/A not for publication  
city, town Holdrege N/A vicinity  
state Nebraska code NE county Phelps code 137 zip code 68949

#### 3. Classification

Ownership of Property	Category of Property	Number of Resources within Property	
<input type="checkbox"/> private	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	Contributing	Noncontributing
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> public-local	<input type="checkbox"/> district	<u>1</u>	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> public-state	<input type="checkbox"/> site	_____	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> public-Federal	<input type="checkbox"/> structure	_____	_____
	<input type="checkbox"/> object	_____	_____
		<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>
			Total

Name of related multiple property listing: County Courthouses of Nebraska  
Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

#### 4. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, 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.  See continuation sheet.

[Signature] Date November 17, 1989

#### State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria.  See cont. sheet.

Signature of commenting or other official \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

#### State or Federal agency and bureau

#### 5. 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): \_\_\_\_\_

Patrick Andrus 1/10/90

[Signature] Signature of the Keeper Date of Action \_\_\_\_\_

**6. Function or Use**

Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)  
Government/courthouse

Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)  
Government/courthouse

**7. Description**

Architectural Classification  
(enter categories from instructions)

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

Beaux Arts

foundation stone  
walls brick  
roof other  
other stone  
metal

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

[X] See continuation sheet, section 7, page 1.

**8. Statement of Significance**

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:  
 nationally  statewide  locally

Applicable National Register Criteria  A  B  C  D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions)  A  B  C  D  E  F  G

Areas of Significance  
(Enter categories from instructions)

Period of Significance                      Significant Dates

Architecture  
Politics/government

1910-39                      1910-11  
N/A

Cultural Affiliation  
N/A

Significant Person  
N/A

Architect/Builder  
Gernandt, William F.

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

[X] See continuation sheet, section 8, page 1.

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**9. Major Bibliographical References**

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[X] See continuation sheet, section 9, page 1.

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:  
[x] State historic preservation office  
[ ] Other state agency  
[ ] Federal agency  
[ ] Local government  
[ ] University  
[ ] Other  
Specify repository: \_\_\_\_\_

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**10. Geographical Data**

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Acreage of property 2 acres

UTM References

A	1   4	4   6   8   6   1   0	4   4   7   6   4   0   0	B			
	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
C				D			
	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing

[ ] See continuation sheet, section 10, page 1.

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Verbal Boundary Description

[X] See continuation sheet, section 10, page 1.

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Boundary Justification

[X] See continuation sheet, section 10, page 1.

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**11. Form Prepared By**

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name/title	Barbara Beving Long, consultant
organization	Four Mile Research Co. date November 8, 1989
street & number	3140 Easton Boulevard telephone (515) 266-4964
city or town	Des Moines state Iowa zip code 50317

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## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

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Built in 1910-11, the Phelps County Courthouse is an excellent, largely unaltered example of the Property Type, County Citadel. Identifying features include: rectangular shape, centered entrance, costly materials, distinctive ornamentation, Beaux Arts stylistic influence, provision for fireproof storage, and impression of a government building representing modernity, simplicity, strength, and prosperity. In addition, the courthouse has other County Citadel characteristics: flat roof, prominent raised basement, and designed by an architect. The property is the first of ten courthouses Nebraska architect William F. Gernandt designed in an unusually productive period, between 1910 and 1923. As an excellent and early example of his work, it is of Statewide Significance.

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The Phelps County Courthouse consists of two stories on a high raised basement. The basement is ashlar limestone, and limestone is also used for the massive columns and other trim. The stone contrasts well with buff-colored brick.

A prominent feature are immense semi-circular painted metal arches that are centered on three sides of the building. The arches rise above a rather simple paneled brick parapet and are linked by a heavy moulded metal cornice having block modillions. The curving shape is repeated over the entry and for windows that flank the main entrance on the south facade. Massive stone columns support the arch, in pairs on the main (south) facade and singly on the east and west facades. The smooth round columns have elaborate composite capitals and rest on unusually high bases, typical Gernandt design features.

The courthouse exhibits elements of the Beaux Arts style, including a wealth of classical detail (especially at the main entrance), immense columns, a raised basement, projecting pavilions, and a grandiose quality. Notable features create a rich impression and include brick corner quoins in two alternating lengths, a finely detailed second story rectangular balcony (note brackets with elongated triglyphs and outsized voussoir or keystone shapes between them, squat balusters centered between paneled corners, all supported by a stone ledge having shortened consoles), and pronounced entry arch (cornice returns, an acroteria in bas relief, dentils) with paired, stacked columns, (rather than side-by-side).

The architect has employed the classical vocabulary with verve and imagination, a typical feature of his courthouse designs. Ornamental detail is tucked in all sorts of places: an egg-and-dart course on the

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parapet behind the cornice-level semi-circular arch, two acanthus consoles flanking the recessed entry, a fluted pilaster between the windows of the second story balcony.

The 79x87' building was designed to have one public entrance, on the south side, and a minor rear entrance leading to the basement on the north side. The north or back of the building continues the materials and treatment of the other facades but in a greatly simplified manner.

On the south facade a series of steps emphasize the feeling of entering an important public building. There are five steps to an exterior landing, then four steps to the entry vestibule, followed by a longer flight up to the first floor or down to the basement. The spacious 25x16' central corridor has a series of large county offices off it with the supervisors meeting room located at the north end. On the second floor the district courtroom occupied nearly the full extent of the west side of the building, and related judicial uses take up the remaining space.

Circular motifs from the exterior are repeated on the interior--for the railing around the stairs to the second floor, for metal balusters, and in the district courtroom. Behind the judge's bench is a curved niche with curved woodwork which serves as a fine backdrop for the judge's chair. In the niche is a "Statue of Justice," sculpted by Holdrege artist Henry Sundeen.

Other original elements include a mosaic in the foyer with "PHELPS" in it, dusty pink marble stair steps, and black and white marble wainscoting and stair risers. The latter, a marble with a distinctive swirling pattern, was a favorite of the architect's. Gernandt typically devoted considerable attention to interior ornamentation, especially the district courtroom.

There have been interior alterations: paneling in offices, an elevator, and dropped ceilings with fluorescent lighting, although the central hall retains its high ceiling. Changes in the courtroom include enclosing a curving mezzanine space (to provide more office space) and moving the witness box. Exterior change is minor and expected: metal storm windows applied over the original windows, some replacement windows on the side and rear of the basement, and an unobtrusive door added to the east facade to allow access to a fenced exercise yard. The jail is still in use in the basement. Historic photos show that a clock was once located in the arch of the main facade, as there are now on the east and west facades.

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The courthouse is centered on a full block and is surrounded by commercial or other public buildings and attractive brick streets. Numerous deciduous trees dot the site, and there are also several concrete pads with metal benches on them. The north end of the site is given over to parking. Concrete walks separate the parking lot from the lawn to the south. There are also concrete walks from the southeast and southwest corners of the site and leading directly to the main entrance, also around the building (but stopping at the prisoner exercise yard). Objects are of small scale and modest design and were not counted in this nomination: simple flagpole and small "Flame of Freedom" dedicated in 1969 to county veterans (on the west or left side of the south facade).

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The Phelps County Courthouse is architecturally significant (Criterion C) and also historically significant (Criterion A) for its association with politics and local government. The property derives its historic significance as the focal point for the administration of local government and institutions in Phelps County. It is a fine example of public architecture in the community and contains good examples of design features and facilities distinctive to its design and use as a courthouse.

As an excellent example of the County Citadel, the courthouse contains design features and facilities distinctive to its design and use (such as fireproof vaults), has a rectangular shape, centered entrance, costly materials, distinctive ornamentation, and Beaux Arts stylistic influence. Elements of the design combine effectively to convey the impression of a government building representing modernity, simplicity, strength, and prosperity, also features of the County Citadel. The property is the first of ten courthouses Nebraska architect William F. Gernandt designed in an unusually productive period, between 1910 and 1923. As an excellent and early example of his work, it is of Statewide Significance.

The Period of Significance is 1910, when construction began, to 1939, when the "fifty year rule" takes effect. The Phelps County Courthouse is being nominated as an example of the Property Type, County Courthouses of Nebraska (County Citadel) of the Context, County Government in Nebraska, 1854-1941, from the Multiple Property Submission, County Courthouses of Nebraska.

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Phelps County is located in south central Nebraska, one county north of the Kansas state line. Its north border is the Platte River. Construction of a railroad across the state in the early 1870s encouraged settlement near its potential route. In 1872 the rail line reached Lowell in Kearney County, just east of present Phelps County. Believing the railroad would enter the area soon, settlers organized Phelps County in 1873. In an election held in April 1873, a county seat site was chosen and named Williamsburg.

In 1879 the county seat was moved to the more centrally located Phelps Center, but this change did not end the county seat wars in the county. By the time of the move the county was in severe financial straits. County officials were evidently not behaving responsibly. In an August 1883 election, county residents voted to issue \$35,000 in bonds to pay bills the county owed, a measure they had failed to approve in 1879. Thereafter, county finances attained a more solid footing.

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Established in 1883, the present county seat of Holdrege enjoyed rail connections on the Burlington and Missouri Railroad, and boosters also sought the county seat designation. The railroad encouraged this project, and its real estate arm, the Lincoln Land Company, offered a block of land for the courthouse, provided Holdrege residents built a courthouse on it. The courthouse (a flimsy and modest structure) was completed by May 1884, even before residents petitioned to move the county seat.

As noted in Schellenberg's book on county seat wars, Holdrege residents were not content to wait for the election, and stole county records from the courthouse in Phelps Center (when the clerk was away duck hunting). They deposited the county records in the recently completed "courthouse" in Holdrege.

In the autumn of 1884, residents got around to petitioning for an election on the "relocation of the County Seat of Phelps County, Nebraska," according to county records. In an election held November 11, 1884, county voters strongly approved the change to Holdrege. A selling point may have been that Holdrege residents promised to pay for a better courthouse. Without that pledge, county voters would have had to issue bonds, for the courthouses in Phelps Center and Holdrege were both inadequate. As the newspaper noted after the November 1884 election, "the farmers of Phelps County voted for light taxes and their own interests and thus relocated the county seat at Holdrege by a good round majority."

Although county records were silent on the November election, the next recorded meeting after the October 6, 1884 meeting in Phelps Center was in Holdrege on January 13, 1885.

Holdrege boosters soon replaced the modest courthouse, and the cornerstone for the second courthouse built there in 1884 was laid in October. By the early twentieth century, county residents were prepared to replace this two-story wood frame courthouse with a more substantial edifice. On August 3, 1909, a petition signed by 1,039 county residents was submitted to the Board of Supervisors requesting a vote on a \$100,000 bond issue. At the general election in November, the measure passed.

Six architects competed for the honor of designing the Phelps County Courthouse. On February 8, 1910, the board chose W.F. Gernandt & Company, then of Fairbury, Nebraska, to be architect. On his stationary, Gernandt stated they were "specialists in the designing of public schools and court houses," but the Phelps County Courthouse is his first known

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design. The contractor selected was Rowles & Bailey of Oklahoma City. A separate contract was awarded to P.N. Kjar for the plumbing and heating.

The old courthouse that occupied the center of the courthouse square was demolished, and county offices were crowded into the small brick jail that then graced the site. On July 1, excavation work commenced, and on December 1, 1910, the cornerstone (of "dark Warsaw granite") was laid. It must have been a blustery day, for the newspaper reported that the songs by the chorus "could not [be] given because of the crowds and the breezes prevailing." And the throng "was so great and the wind so strong that only those who were nearest the temporary platform could hear what was being said."

The project continued on through the summer of 1910 and into 1911, due primarily to delays in receiving construction materials. On June 13, 1911, the contractors formally turned over the keys to the courthouse to the county, and by mid-August all county offices had moved into the \$107,072 courthouse.

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Long, Barbara Beving. "County Courthouses of Nebraska." Multiple Property Submission. 1989.  
Holdrege, Nebraska. Sanborn Fire Insurance Map. 1909, 1915.  
Phelps County. Supervisors' Records. Book 2.  
Phelps County Historical Society. A History of Phelps County, Nebraska.  
Dallas: Taylor Publishing Co., 1981.  
Portrait of Progress. n.p.: Phelps County Board, 1973.  
Nebraska State Historical Society. Photo Collection. #M281-1038, M281-1037.  
Cornerstone. Phelps County Courthouse.  
Tracings. Phelps County Courthouse. William F. Gernandt and Company,  
Architects.

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Verbal Boundary Description

The nominated property, Phelps County Courthouse, occupies all of Block 8 of the Original Town Plat for Holdrege and is roughly 300x300' in size.

Boundary Justification

The boundary includes the entire city block that has historically been associated with the property.