

**United States Department of the Interior
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form**

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

MAR 19 1982

1. Name

historic Empire Building

and/or common City National Bank Building

2. Location

street & number 1928 1st Avenue North (NW corner 1st Avenue & 20th St.) — not for publication

city, town Birmingham — vicinity of — congressional district 6

state Alabama code 01 county Jefferson code 073

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input type="checkbox"/> public	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture <input type="checkbox"/> museum
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> commercial <input type="checkbox"/> park
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> educational <input type="checkbox"/> private residence
<input type="checkbox"/> site	Public Acquisition	Accessible	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment <input type="checkbox"/> religious
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government <input type="checkbox"/> scientific
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial <input type="checkbox"/> transportation
		<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military <input type="checkbox"/> other:

4. Owner of Property

name City National Bank of Birmingham

street & number Attention: Hoy L. Taylor P. O. Box 1887

city, town Birmingham — vicinity of — state Alabama

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Jefferson County Courthouse

street & number 716 21st Street North

city, town Birmingham — vicinity of — state Alabama

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

Downtown Birmingham, Birmingham Historical Society 1977-79 Jefferson County Historic
title Site Survey, 1972, p. 32 has this property been determined eligible? yes no

Jefferson County Historic Site Survey, 1976, p. 29

date >1970-present — federal — state county local

depository for survey records Birmingham Historical Society

city, town Birmingham — vicinity of — state Alabama

7. Description

Condition		Check one	Check one
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> deteriorated	<input type="checkbox"/> unaltered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> original site
<input type="checkbox"/> good	<input type="checkbox"/> ruins	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> altered	<input type="checkbox"/> moved
<input type="checkbox"/> fair	<input type="checkbox"/> unexposed		date <u>1909</u>

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

The Empire Building (1909) is a 16-story steel-frame skyscraper sheathed, on its two street facades, with white and polychromed terra cotta and richly decorated with Renaissance Revival Classical ornament. A base of monumental attached columns (capped by cushion capitals with egg-and-dart and rosette moldings) and attached Tuscan pilasters carry an ornamented cornice and third story distinguished by delicately molded terra cotta panels of foliate and twisted-column design. The plainer central body of the building rises for ten stories with a vertical emphasis highlighted by moldings that frame the ranges of paired windows and culminate in cartouches below a simple cornice-line. A horizontal cross-emphasis is given by the spandrels below the paired windows at each floor. The upper stories carry a series of nine Florentine windows set into a diaper-patterned polychromed terra cotta wall surface. The windows have elaborate moldings that frame the inner arcade, which is supported by pilasters and a twisted column with foliate capitals. The arcade carries a spandrel within which are busts of heroic and mythical figures. Attic windows are set into the frieze of a massive, elaborate Corinthian cornice of modillions, dentils and classical moldings. The cornice carries a corona which bears 20 panels of the "E" ensignia of the Empire Improvement Company.

Of the interiors, the entrance lobby remains essentially intact, with multicolored walls and floors of various marbles, a panelled and coffered plaster ceiling, bronze elevator entrances and massive brass and milk-glass chandeliers. The unfortunate closure of the balustraded staircase to the second floor could be reversed. The upper floors have been substantially altered except for the bronze elevator doors with marble framing.

A two-story commercial storefront building (c.1908) to the rear (north) of the Empire Building has been incorporated as an annex by recent alterations (1970) in an International style design that is compatible with the architectural design of the Empire Building.

8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below			
<input type="checkbox"/> prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> community planning	<input type="checkbox"/> landscape architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> religion
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-historic	<input type="checkbox"/> conservation	<input type="checkbox"/> law	<input type="checkbox"/> science
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> literature	<input type="checkbox"/> sculpture
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> social/ humanitarian
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input type="checkbox"/> theater
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-1909	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify)
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		

Specific dates 1909 **Builder/Architect** William L. Welton with William Warren, Carpenter and Blair, New York Associates.

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

The Empire Building (1909) was the third skyscraper to be erected at what is locally known as the "Heaviest Corner on Earth", four early 20th-century skyscrapers concentrated at a single intersection, possibly the only such grouping in the nation. Besides its architectural significance as part of this grouping, it is also significant as the most elaborately developed Neo-classical style skyscraper in the city and perhaps in the Southeast. The finely articulated base with its monumental columns and pilasters and the frieze of polychromed terra-cotta at the top three floors exemplify the skill of architect William Leslie Welton. Welton was trained at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and also studied at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. After his studies he worked in the firm of McKim, Meade and White, moving to Birmingham in 1907. The Empire Building is Welton's most distinctive building. The elegance and sophistication of its design marks the city's rapid growth from a rough-and-tumble boomtown founded after the Civil War into a thriving metropolis of business and industry in the early 20th century. The building was developed by the Empire Improvement Company, a group of prominent local developers spearheaded by Robert Jemison, Jr., and was partially financed through a mortgage from the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, the first major development loan acquired from funding sources outside the greater Birmingham area for a local construction project. The Empire Building was purchased in 1965 by City National Bank.

The two-story annex (c 1908) to the rear (north) of the Empire Building housed various commercial concerns until its incorporation as an extension of the ground floor banking rooms of City National Bank (1970).

9. Major Bibliographical References ACREAGE NOT VERIFIED

White, Marjorie L. Ed. Downtown Birmingham Architectural and Historical Walking Tour Guide. Birmingham, Birmingham Historical Society, 1977.
Pamphlet published by Empire Improvement Company at the opening of the Empire Building, 1909.
Jemison Papers, Department of Archives of Birmingham Public Library.

10. Geographical Data

Acreege of nominated property less than one

Quadrangle name Birmingham North

Quadrangle scale 1:24000

UMT References

A

1	6	5	1	8	0	2	0	3	7	0	8	1	5	0
Zone				Easting				Northing						

B

Zone				Easting				Northing						

C

Zone				Easting				Northing						

D

Zone				Easting				Northing						

E

Zone				Easting				Northing						

F

Zone				Easting				Northing						

G

Zone				Easting				Northing						

H

Zone				Easting				Northing						

Verbal boundary description and justification

Section 36 NW 1/4, Tsp. 17s, Range 3w: City block 99, parcel 19, (100' x 50') & 20 (100' x 40')

List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

state code county code

state code county code

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Stephen Stella

organization Birmingham Historical Society

date January 1981

street & number 1425 22nd Street South

telephone (205) 254-2138

city or town Birmingham

state Alabama

12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

national state local

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

State Historic Preservation Officer signature *Stephen Stella*

title State Historic Preservation Officer

date 1-29-82

For HCRS use only

I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

Entered in the National Register

date 3/19/82

Keeper of the National Register *Melaine Byers*

Attest:

date

Chief of Registration