

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL CHAMBER

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United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: Navajo Nation Council Chamber

Other Name/Site Number: Council Chamber, Council House, Central Agency House

2. LOCATION

Street & Number: W008-013 Circle Boulevard

Not for publication:\_\_\_

City/Town: Window Rock

Vicinity:\_\_\_

State: Navajo Nation (Arizona)

County: Apache

Code: 001

Zip Code: 86515

3. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property

Private: \_\_\_

Public-Local: X

Public-State: \_\_\_

Public-Federal:\_\_\_

Category of Property

Building(s): X

District: \_\_\_

Site: \_\_\_

Structure: \_\_\_

Object: \_\_\_

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing

1

\_\_\_

\_\_\_

\_\_\_

1

Noncontributing

\_\_\_ buildings

\_\_\_ sites

\_\_\_ structures

\_\_\_ objects

0 Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register: n/a

Name of Related Multiple Property Listing: n/a

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**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.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Certifying Official

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal Agency and Bureau

In my opinion, the property \_\_\_\_ meets \_\_\_\_ does not meet the National Register criteria.

\_\_\_\_\_  
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
- Determined eligible for the National Register
- Determined not eligible for the National Register
- Removed from the National Register
- Other (explain): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Keeper

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Action

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**6. FUNCTION OR USE**

Historic: Government Sub: Capitol

Current: Government Sub: Capitol

**7. DESCRIPTION**

Architectural Classification: Other: Navajo Vernacular Revival

**Materials:**

Foundation: Stone / sandstone

Walls: Stone / sandstone

Roof: Lower tier: asphalt

Upper tier: metal

Other: Wood, metal

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**Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.**

The Navajo Nation Council Chamber is located in Window Rock, Arizona—a site chosen in 1933 by Commissioner of Indian Affairs John Collier to be the new administrative headquarters of the Navajo tribal government. Under Collier's direction, the Office of Indian Affairs (OIA) constructed the Council Chamber in 1934–1935 using funds allocated by the Public Works Administration (PWA). The site comprises a single large building—the Council Chamber—on 1.6 acres incorporating landscaped grounds and paved parking areas.

The capital at Window Rock is situated on the eastern edge of the Navajo Reservation, not far from the Arizona/New Mexico border. It lies about 7 miles south of Fort Defiance, Arizona, and about 25 miles northwest of Gallup, New Mexico. Encompassing an area of more than 25,000 square miles in Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico, the Navajo Reservation is at present the nation's largest. Commissioner Collier chose to locate the new capital on a Navajo sacred site, which he had planned to name *Nee Alneeng*, Navajo for “center of the world.” However, the name provoked controversy, as it is one of several Navajo expressions for hell. Collier relented and adopted the traditional Navajo name for the site, *Tse'gha'hoodza'ni'*, or “hole in the rock,” in reference to the remarkable natural stone bridge that dominates the landscape of the area.<sup>1</sup>

The Council Chamber sits a few hundred yards south of the stone bridge, at the base of eroded reddish sandstone buttes that rise to an elevation of about 6,500 feet and are a continuation of the unique formation from which the headquarters derives its name. With its rusticated red sandstone façade and overall “rustic” architectural style, the chamber was designed to harmonize with its spectacular natural surroundings.

The chamber is a flat-roofed octagonal structure 70 feet in diameter, 30 feet high, and about 11,000 square feet in size. Composed of native Dakota sandstone in a modified Navajo hogan style, it is constructed on two tiers supported by radiating Ponderosa pine vigas (exposed roof beams) and broad stone piers. The design employs the elements of heavy massing, a flat parapeted roof, exposed wooden lintels, vigas, and canales (water spouts). The chamber's octagon shape and structural framework are meant to evoke a monumental hogan, the traditional building form of the Navajo people.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, the building incorporates the Navajo ceremonial features of an east-facing main entrance and a windowless north wall. A mural cycle depicting “The History and Progress of the Navajo Nation” by Navajo artist Gerald Nailor decorates the interior. By combining “modern inventions for comfort with ancient fundamental solidarities,” as the Office of Indian Affairs proclaimed on the eve of the building's construction in 1934, the Council Chamber was to stand as “a tangible symbol of modern Indian tribal self-government.”<sup>3</sup>

From the completion of the Council Chamber in November 1935 to the present day, the Navajo Nation has continuously used the building for its legislative sessions and governmental activities. The evolution and maturing of the Navajo government during this period necessitated alterations

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<sup>1</sup>Florence Warren Seymour, “Thunder Over the Southwest,” *Saturday Evening Post* 211 (April 1, 1939): 23, 74.

<sup>2</sup>According to David Brugge, it was not until after the 1890s that the hogan served as a ceremonial structure as well as a family dwelling. See Brugge's “Pueblo Influence on Navajo Architecture,” *El Palacio* 75, no. 3 (Autumn 1968): 16.

<sup>3</sup>[John Collier and Mary Heaton Vorse], “The First Tribal Capital,” *Indians at Work: A News Sheet for Indians and the Indian Service* (published by the Office of Indian Affairs, Washington, D.C.) 1, no. 24 (August 1, 1934), 6.

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to the building to accommodate the changing requirements of the legislative operations. Thus, modifications to both the structure and its immediate surroundings subsequent to the period of significance have affected the original feeling of the chamber as it existed in the 1930s and 1940s. These alterations aside, the Council Chamber today still retains a level of integrity sufficient to communicate meaningful associations with the sea of change in federal Indian policy under Commissioner Collier (from one of assimilation to one of Indian self-determination) and with the impact of that policy on the political history of the Navajo Nation, the largest Indian tribe in the United States.

Aesthetically as well as symbolically, the Council Chamber is the architectural centerpiece of the complex of buildings constructed at Window Rock in 1934–1938 under the auspices of the PWA, the New Deal agency charged with “priming the pump” of the nation’s construction industry.

In order to accomplish the goal of blending administrative needs with regional cultural preferences, Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes procured the services of, as Collier noted later, “an outstanding firm of architects, having practical experience in work similar to that of the Indian Service.”<sup>4</sup> The firm comprised Francis L.S. Mayers, O.H. Murray, and Hardie Phillip of New York City, whom Collier then engaged to design the entire OIA building project in the Southwest. It is not known exactly how Ickes became acquainted with the work of Mayers, Murray and Phillip, except to say that the firm was known for its work in the Mission Revival style in Arizona and California. The precepts of that style satisfied the criteria specified by Collier for the Indian reservation buildings: the architects were to take into account the prevailing architectural style of the community, the suitability of the plan to the surrounding landscape, and the availability of native building materials. “Among the Pueblos of New Mexico the typical Pueblo style of architecture is followed,” wrote Collier. “This consists principally of straight walls and flat roofs with vigas which serve as a support for the roof; the ends protruding from the parapet give a pleasing architectural finish.”<sup>5</sup> For Navajo buildings, Collier and his architects used the Pueblo style, but they made it “more Navajo” by substituting stone for the adobe that would have constituted its primary building material.

Messrs. Mayers, Murray and Phillip were acolytes of Bertram Grovesnor Goodhue (1869–1924) who is today most recognized for his Gothic Revival projects created in collaboration with Ralph Adams Cram, his partner from 1892 to 1913, and for his design of the 1915 Panama-California Exposition in San Diego, which provided the impetus for the Mission Revival style in California.<sup>6</sup> Goodhue’s untimely death in 1924 left a number of major projects to be completed by his three assistant architects, who continued the work under the name of Goodhue Associates. The three architects subsequently changed the name of the practice, but they continued to

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<sup>4</sup>Collier, “Indian Reservation Buildings in the Southwest,” 35.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 38.

<sup>6</sup>Although Goodhue laid out the San Diego exposition with a Mission Revival theme, contributing architect Mary Colter incorporated Taos and Zuni pueblos and Navajo hogans into her design for the Painted Desert section. Goodhue Associates was undoubtedly influenced by Colter’s use of indigenous Native American structures, motifs, and materials. Her work definitely influenced federal parks policy concerning the built environment in the 1920s and 1930s. “National Park Service Rustic,” as it came to be known, advocated designs for buildings that harmonized with the natural surroundings. The characteristics of the style governed the designs of the OIA structures on reservations. See Arnold Berke, *Mary Colter: Architect of the Southwest* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002), 105.

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perpetuate Goodhue's philosophy. "If our reputation is to be worth anything, it must be on the basis of showing the world that our master's teachings have not been in vain," wrote Francis Mayers.<sup>7</sup> Those teachings, according to Goodhue biographer Richard Oliver, stemmed from Goodhue's goal "to design buildings that began with an articulate and functional plan yielding vigorously composed, artistic masses enriched with expressive symbolism and built with a craftsman's attitude toward construction."<sup>8</sup>

Goodhue's architectural philosophy seems to have echoed Collier's. In applying that philosophy, Mayers, Murray and Phillip succeeded in realizing Collier's vision of a unique building to represent the concept of Navajo self-government. Without doubt, the Council Chamber's eclectic mix of massive piers, large radiating vigas, clerestory, and octagonal form set it apart from the remainder of OIA buildings as befits its important and symbolically potent function as the site of the Navajo Nation governing headquarters.

The appearance of the Council Chamber today, when viewed from the east toward the front elevation, has changed only minimally since the building's completion in 1935. The octagonal form is strongly emphasized by the imposing rectangular piers that project from the eight corners of the first story. The piers are battered and rise more than 10 feet above the flat parapet of the one-story primary mass. The half-story octagonal clerestory also rises about 10 feet above the parapet and is recessed about 14 feet from the primary walls.

The building's foundation and its random ashlar-constructed walls are of Dakota sandstone quarried "from the surrounding cliffs" and hewn into 16-inch-thick blocks. Lime and portland cement serve as binding agents. The sandstone blocks were dressed roughly at the outer sides, and the joints were recessed, forming a rusticated surface. The light color of the mortar joints contrasts strongly with the red stones, the sizes and shapes of which vary in accordance with the "hand-built" character of the rustic style associated with government buildings constructed for the National Park Service and other federal agencies during the 1920s and 1930s.

Perhaps the most distinctive external feature of the chamber is the system of large Ponderosa pine vigas, which were harvested by Navajo laborers from the nearby Chuska Mountains. Collier's specifications for the choice of vigas were exacting: "Vigas for the roof construction shall be good, sound logs reasonably straight, stripped of bark with knots dressed off flush," stated a memorandum. "Exposed ends of projected vigas shall be cut with an axe, not sawn. The logs shall be native pine . . . , autumn cut and well seasoned."<sup>9</sup> Thusly chosen, the vigas measure 16 inches in diameter and about 50 feet in length. They radiate outward from the center of the clerestory roof, extend through the clerestory walls above each corner of the main roof, continue through the piers, and project out another 4 feet beyond the outer plane of the piers (figure 2). They thus form an ingenious network of cantilevers supporting the weight of the roof.

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<sup>7</sup>Quoted by Romy Wylie, *Caltech's Architectural Heritage: From Spanish Tile to Modern Stone* (Glendale, California: Balcony Press, 2000), n.p.

<sup>8</sup>Oliver, "Cram and Goodhue," in *Master Builders: A Guide to Famous American Architects*, ed. by Diane Maddex (Washington, D.C.: The Preservation Press, 1985), 115.

<sup>9</sup>"Specifications for Vigas," memorandum, n.d., archives of the Navajo Nation HPD, Window Rock.

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The original design for the Council Chamber called for two attached annexes (figure 3). The proposed structures were also octagonal and in configuration resembled hogans even more directly than the main building. They were to serve as antechambers for committee meetings.<sup>10</sup> “As you know,” wrote Collier to Roy Bradley, superintendent of construction, in July 1935, “the two hogans have not been constructed, due to insufficient funds for this project.”<sup>11</sup> Although the antechambers were not built, the doorways connecting them to the main chamber were. The doorways today lead from the council chamber into modern-day additions on the northwest and southwest walls of the main building. The original appearance of the doorways prior to these additions is not known.

The primary, or east-facing entrance, retains its historical appearance with two exceptions. In the first case, the original pair of wooden entry doors each consisted of a six-lite window above a panel decorated with a Navajo diamond pattern. The iron hardware on the doors was beautifully finished with hand-wrought details. These doors were replaced, probably in the 1960s, with a pair of doors that are flush-wood, unadorned, and windowless. In the second case, a 3-foot-high Dakota sandstone masonry base was added to the right of the entrance in the 1950s. The base supports a large cast-iron bell “presented to the Navajo Tribal Council by the Santa Fe Railway Company November 1956.” The bell is rung when the council is in session.

These changes notwithstanding, the entrance still possesses its two most important features. The first feature was part of the original design of Mayers, Murray and Phillip, who proposed hand-carved wood panels on either side of the door frame. “It is the suggestion of the architects,” wrote Collier, “that the wood carvings . . . be executed by a competent, local Indian designer, preferably a Navajo; this is an excellent suggestion, and we heartily indorse [*sic*] it.”<sup>12</sup> Following Collier’s recommendation, Alan Hulsizer and Sally Lucas Jean of the Indian Service education program located Charles K. Shirley, a Navajo artist who was at the time working on a soil conservation project near Gallup. To Superintendent Bradley, Shirley submitted a preliminary design that he had titled “The Livelihood and Religious Rites of the Navajo Indians” (figure 4). A news item in the *Albuquerque Journal* on February 27, 1935, described the design, which is extant and in situ: “The panels, one on each side of the door, will be seven feet high. The design [on the left panel] shows a wood fire at the bottom, with a streamer of smoke winding upward. A Navajo silversmith is shown next, then a [Navajo woman] at a loom, and at the top, a mountain in the background. Lightning bolts and clouds in the sky lend a touch of symbolism.”<sup>13</sup>

For the design of the right panel, Shirley carved a different subject. He created a hunting scene depicting, from the bottom up, a pronghorn antelope galloping diagonally out toward the viewer, a leaping mule deer, a Navajo hunter on horseback, and geese flying overhead at the top.

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<sup>10</sup>Restrooms originally were located in a separate structure. In a letter to Collier, Hardie Phillip mentions a blueprint locating “the men’s and women’s wash houses about 500 ft. north of the Council House” (Phillip to Collier, 6 June 1934, archives of the Navajo Nation HPD, Window Rock).

<sup>11</sup>John Collier to Roy H. Bradley, 10 July 1935, archives of the Navajo Nation HPD, Window Rock.

<sup>12</sup>Collier to Bradley, 8 November 1934, archives of the Navajo Nation HPD, Window Rock.

<sup>13</sup>Cited in Colleen Hamilton, NRHP draft nomination for the Navajo Nation Council Chamber, 1998, archives of the Navajo Nation HPD, Window Rock.

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The second feature occurs in the stonework above the entryway. Here, an anonymous Navajo stone mason inserted two charming bas-relief carvings, the motifs of which were suggested to him by the rough forms of the field stones. Hardie Phillip described them in a progress letter to Bradley:

As you will note in the one snap [shot] of the stone work at the Central Agency Council House, the Indians have included a horses [*sic*] head and also a cows [*sic*] head. These two stones are in the top course as shown in the picture, one to the right, and the other to the left of the center of the snap. I did not request that these two stones be taken out as I thought that there might be some legend in connection therewith, and inasmuch as they are solid stones and rather high up in the wall, that they are really not as prominent as they appear to be in the photograph.<sup>14</sup>

The carvings remain in place today, intended as the signatures of the anonymous craftsman and his crew.

The front entrance is further defined by a hand-adzed, exposed lintel, the ends of which angle outward beyond the door jamb. This motif is repeated in all ten of the building's windows. Two windows are positioned on the main floor, centered one each in the walls on the north and south of the entrance wall. They are the original three-sash, single-lite hopper windows,<sup>15</sup> with sashes still operable. The remaining eight windows occur in the clerestory. Each unit consists of two-lite hopper windows grouped in threes under a single exposed lintel.

Above the entryway, the roof of the first story interrupts the parapet and extends about 5 feet beyond the wall plane. Supported by seven projecting vigas and measuring 17 feet in width, this construction creates an overhang to protect the entrance.

The copper-lined canales draining the primary and clerestory roofs are characteristic features of the style. They extend about 4 feet beyond the outer plane of the parapet. On the main floor, two canales project through each parapet wall except the east wall, where the front entrance is located. Similarly in the clerestory, a single canale projects through each wall except that on the east.

Whereas five walls of the octagonal first story (ranging clockwise from the north wall to the south wall) are today intact as originally built, the three remaining walls (the southwest, west, and northwest walls) are obscured by a sandstone bathroom structure added after 1940 and by two removable antechambers added in 1979 (figure 5). These additions were built to the contour of the three western elevations of the Council Chamber.

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<sup>14</sup>Phillip to Roy H. Bradley, 5 May 1936, "Re: Progress Photographs," archives of the Navajo Nation HPD, Window Rock.

<sup>15</sup>Hopper windows pivot inwards along the bottom of the sash in contrast to awning windows that pivot outwards from the top of the sash.



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The bathroom addition, which contains separate men's and women's restrooms, demonstrates an attempt by the builders to respect the original design and materials of the existing structure. The addition is tucked between the two piers that flank the west wall. Further, the builders made a concerted effort to match the stone-masonry construction and the detailing of the windows to those of the original building. Today, however, the windows are covered at the exterior with plywood, and the entrance door is flush-steel with windows consisting of floor-to-ceiling metal glazing units.

The exterior of the west wall of the bathroom addition is presently obscured by a large heating, ventilating, and air conditioning (HVAC) unit, which is enclosed by a chain-link fence. The Navajo Tribal Council voted to install HVAC equipment in 1960, after ownership of the building was transferred to the Navajo Nation. At this point, the former owner, the BIA, no longer provided steam heat to the building and the Navajos had to install a new system.<sup>16</sup> The unit remains the most visually disturbing alteration to the original structure. To accommodate the mechanical system, large metal ducts rise from the unit, extend across the roof of the bathroom, and continue up onto the roof of the clerestory. The system is largely outdated, and the Navajo Facilities Maintenance Department has proposed its replacement with a modern, less obtrusive system.<sup>17</sup>

The more recent additions, comprising meeting rooms and a mechanical room, employ no effort to be compatible with the original building in terms of materials, wall thickness, or detailing. The additions are wood-framed and have been erected on either side of the bathroom (figure 6). Their end walls extend out from and thus cover up the piers to which they are attached. The walls have an exterior stucco finish, which provides a jarring contrast to the masonry construction of the original building.

The interior of the Navajo Nation Council Chamber is one large room. Before the building was wired for electricity, sunlight entered the room through the eight large windows in the clerestory. When the tribal council installed the HVAC unit, the contractors sealed the clerestory windows with panels in order cut down on the heat generated by the sunlight. They then extended vents through one sash of each window to provide openings for heating and cooling ducts.

The exposed wood structural system of the clerestory dominates the interior. The massive radiating vigas that support the upper roof are tied to smaller vigas projecting into the room at the top of the first story (figure 2). These vigas rest upon steel posts at each corner of the octagon. Upon the posts, joists have been laid in a concentric configuration around the octagonal space, thus supporting the base of the clerestory wall. The wood members are stained and the steel posts are painted the cream color of the clerestory walls, which visually lightens and thus minimizes them.

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<sup>16</sup>“Resolution of the Advisory Committee of the Navajo Council,” November 1, 1960.

<sup>17</sup>At the time of this writing, the Facilities Maintenance Department had contracted with Rick Lewis, a Texas architect, to do a feasibility study for restoring and maintaining the Council Chamber. Lewis is also to prepare an Historic Structures Report.

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The steel posts also separate the main floor of the chamber from a raised gallery that occupies the periphery along the north, northeast, east, southeast, and south walls. A wooden railing and two steps establish the demarcation between the gallery and the main floor. Centered against the west wall is a raised platform for the speaker of the house and other officials.

When the Council Chamber was completed in 1935, it was to be furnished with hand-crafted benches and tables built in the rustic Southwestern style. In the summer of that year, Hardie Phillip sent Collier a letter, accompanied by a drawing, describing the seating arrangement for the chamber.<sup>18</sup>

You will note that a certain number of benches are shown and the remainder of the seating is taken care of through the use of portable chairs. The thought in the arrangement is that in all probability the benches will remain in place most of the time, and that the portable chairs can be used when additional seating is required. The effect in the Council House would be much finer if a large portion of the floor area can be free of seats or benches.

The benches are specially designed; but a stock chair would probably be selected, and stained the same color as that used for the fixed benches now in place around the outer walls.

Collier replied that it might be necessary to order stock benches as well as chairs, as funds for the project were running out. Collier asked Superintendent Bradley to “either advertise for the benches, furnished complete, in accordance with details, or furnish us with an estimate of cost for making them at the job. . . .It will be necessary to keep the cost of these benches quite low.”<sup>19</sup>

The benches were eventually provided, as well as the chairs, which were arranged on the concrete floor facing the speaker’s platform. Photographs from the 1940s and later show that these rustic furnishings subsequently gave way to simple wooden desks with carved diamond patterns as ornamentation and industrial metal chairs.

The lack of funds had an impact on more than the furnishings of the Council Chamber. Originally, murals were to be painted on the interior of not only the chamber, but also of the day schools on the reservation. As early as 1934, Superintendent of Secondary Education Alan Hulsizer wrote to Roy Bradley requesting funds to employ seven or eight Navajo artists to paint the murals. Bradley responded that although he sympathized with the proposal, he had neither the money nor the authorization to proceed.<sup>20</sup>

In the fall of 1937, E.R. Fryer, general superintendent of Navajo affairs, contacted Collier with a proposal to create three 18-foot-long murals for the Council Chamber. They were to be painted by two local Indian artists, Charles Shirley, who had already done the carvings for the front-door

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<sup>18</sup>Phillip to Collier, 27 June 1935, archives of the Navajo Nation HPD, Window Rock.

<sup>19</sup>Collier to Bradley, 10 July 1935, archives of the Navajo Nation HPD, Window Rock.

<sup>20</sup>Hulsizer to Bradley, 13 August 1934, and Bradley to Hulsizer, 20 August 1934; archives of the Navajo Nation HPD, Window Rock.

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panels, and Tsinnajinnie.<sup>21</sup> The content of the paintings was based on a collaboration between the two artists and Richard Van Valkenburgh, at the time an employee of the Soil Conservation Service who was also an expert on Navajo culture.<sup>22</sup> The subject matter of the murals conformed to Collier's notion of using Navajo arts and crafts to stimulate an appreciation among the Navajos for their own cultural heritage. "Besides being tremendously valuable to the Navajo," Fryer concluded in his letter, "the murals as we see them will be of great ethnic value to the Whites . . . Shirley wants to interweave the simple elements of the culture into the general continuity of the historical sequence."<sup>23</sup>

Discussion about the murals continued through the fall. In early 1938, Collier approved the subject matter and the allocation of funds. However, the work was postponed, presumably because the funds were shifted to other priorities. The project was not resumed until 1942, when money became available from the Civil Works Administration.<sup>24</sup> Gerald L. Nailor (known in Navajo as Toh-Yah, "Walking by a River"), a nationally acclaimed Navajo painter who had studied at the Santa Fe Indian School, was chosen as the artist.<sup>25</sup>

Nailor's beautiful mural cycle, completed in August 1943 and called "The History and Porgies of the Navajo Nation," is the crowning feature of the Council Chamber. Nailor painted a panorama depicting the key events of Navajo history, beginning with the coming of the Spanish in the 1600s. The contents are thought to be Nailor's own, but his subject matter closely parallels that proposed by Van Valkenburgh, Shirley, and Tsinnajinnie. Nailor expanded the number of panels from three to eight, thus covering all of the walls of the chamber.

In 1996, Ray Baldwin Louis, public information officer for the Navajo Nation Office of the Speaker, wrote a synopsis of the cycle, which is worth quoting in toto. Louis begins with the scenes on the west wall and moves counterclockwise around the chamber:

The Navajo Nation Council Chamber is . . . considered a sacred place where planning, discussions, the sharing of ideas and decisions are made for the good of the people. . . Following their emergence into this "glittering world" between the four sacred mountains—Mount Blanca in the east, Mount Taylor in the south, San Francisco Peaks in the west, and Mount Hesperus in the north—*Diné* (The

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<sup>21</sup>Fryer to Collier, 6 October 1937, archives of the Navajo Nation HPD, Window Rock.

<sup>22</sup>Van Valkenburgh later became an anthropologist and a member of the staff of Lucy W. Adams, who was appointed supervisor of the Navajo educational program in 1936. Van Valkenburgh completed several solid studies of Navajo history, geography, and anthropology, which were distributed among the schools, thus providing needed instructional materials for the classrooms. See Parman, *The Navajos and the New Deal*, 209.

<sup>23</sup>Fryer to Collier, 6 October 1937.

<sup>24</sup>Kenneth R. Philp, *John Collier's Crusade for Indian Reform, 1920–1954* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1977), 124–125.

<sup>25</sup>Nailor was one of the most important artists to emerge from the progressive curriculum developed at the Santa Fe Indian School by Dorothy Dunn in 1932–1937. Following Collier's official federal policy of fostering Indian arts, Dunn established in Santa Fe the first full-fledged art program to be offered at a bureau school. Dunn began the painting classes in 1932 with one fixed principle: "The painting would have to be Indian." See Joy L. Gritton, *Modernism and U. S. Indian Policy* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000), 35–37.

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People, The Human Beings, Mankind) expanded from Southwestern Colorado into New Mexico, Arizona, and Utah.

They were hunters and gatherers of wild food, while planting fields of corn, squash, and melons in stream beds. The west wall depicted this traditional lifestyle, but today only the outer parts are seen with the grinding of corn by two women and the creation of a sand painting by two men [this section, which is behind the speaker's platform and which also featured the controversial subject of the Navajo contact with Spanish missionaries, was covered over with a plywood panel during a modification of the interior in the 1960s].

The southwest wall shows the introduction of sheep to the Navajo people from the Spaniards when they moved into Navajo territory. The Navajos raided Mexican homes and adopted a more diverse way of life with more intensive agriculture and with livestock. They developed the skills of weaving and obtained Mexican coins which silversmiths turned into fine jewelry.

The south wall reveals the aggression of the white people and the peace treaties offered by different Navajo headmen or regional leaders, the misunderstandings inherent in these treaties, and the final campaign by the United States led by Kit Carson against the Navajos. The final battle took place in Canyon de Chelly near Fortress Rock and the Navajos surrendered due to starvation caused by destruction of Navajo crops and livestock.

The southeast wall tells about the long walk in 1864 to Fort Sumner, New Mexico, also known as Bosque Redondo, nearly five hundred miles from Fort Defiance. The horrible detention for four years resulted in the death of nearly three thousand Navajos. The People had insufficient shelter from the elements due to lack of wood, their crops failed, and they were often raided by Kiowas and Comanches. Their life consisted of the routine of daily counts and the dispersing of daily rations.

The east wall depicts the People asking to go back home. Barboncito, known by his Navajo name, Little Mustache, negotiated on behalf of the Navajo people for three days and finally on June 1, 1868, he and eleven other chiefs and seventeen council members signed a treaty between the Navajo Tribe of Indians and the United States Government.

The northeast wall shows the people returning home. It is said that when they saw Mount Taylor, a sign of their homeland, they fell to their knees and cried and blessed the day because they were so happy. Upon returning home, they were given two head of sheep per family for their livelihood, and schools were built. The first school built was on the military base at Fort Defiance. The railroad came in the southern portion of the reservation; Navajos expanded their flocks of sheep and herds of horses; and traders came to establish trading posts.

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The north wall reveals the people living well, raising livestock, weaving, and making jewelry out of silver. Some Navajos returned to their traditional land areas. The Land Allotment Act in 1887 gave individual Navajos private land ranging up to 160 acres. In 1922, oil was discovered in the northern part of Navajoland near Shiprock, New Mexico. A Business Council of three men—Chee Dodge, Daaga'lchee Bikis, and Charley Mitchell—was established by the Bureau of Indian Affairs for the purpose of signing business leases on behalf of the Tribe. Later, Navajo agencies were established by the BIA. To meet the growing Navajo population which was extended beyond the original boundary of the reservation, additions to the reservation were made. When the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934<sup>[4]</sup> was introduced, a second tragedy struck the Navajo people—livestock reduction. Thousands of Navajo sheep were herded off to markets or summarily slaughtered. The U.S. Government stated it was because this was the only solution to overgrazing.

The northwest wall emphasizes the importance of education to the Navajo people. Education is considered to be the central part of Navajo well-being with a young man and young woman standing in the center of a school building, livestock, and agricultural fields. Because of the emphasis put on education and the Navajo view of life and the world, the Navajo Nation has been able to adapt and survive, and even grow in a world dominated by the white culture, and yet retain the uniqueness that is *Diné*.<sup>26</sup>

Nailor's design resulted in a dynamic flow of historic episodes, each of which the artist defined with a diagonal break that suggests the "lazy lines" of a Navajo weaving. Scenes merge abruptly and are partially cut off—each one giving way at the next diagonal line of demarcation, a device Nailor effectively used to advance time.

Nailor prepped the walls of the Council House and painted the murals largely by himself, according to Hoke Denetsosie, a Navajo artist who helped him with aspects of the project. In an interview in July 1988, Denetsosie described Nailor's process as a type of "secco," a technique of mural painting in which mixed paints are applied to a dry plaster composed of lime and sand.<sup>27</sup>

In application, Nailor followed a procedure similar to that historically used in fresco painting. He first primed the plaster-coated walls with a white paint that served as a ground. He then took full-scale cartoons (or sketches) of the design that he had made on sheets of paper, and, with the help of Denetsosie, attached these to the walls. The two artists pricked the lines of the cartoons with a tracing wheel and pounced them with charcoal dust to leave a dotted-line impression.

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<sup>26</sup>Ray Baldwin Louis, "The Murals in the Navajo Nation Council Chamber," 1996, archives of the Navajo Nation HPD, Window Rock.

<sup>27</sup>Hoke Denetsosie, transcribed interview with Leonard Gorman, July 1, 1988, archives of the Navajo Nation HPD, Window Rock. The "true fresco" technique consists of painting on a wet plaster surface using pigments mixed with lime water.

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Nailor then filled in the design by applying oil-based paints in thin washes directly to the ground. A conservation report on the murals prepared by the University of Denver Conservation Center in 1979 noted, "The porous plaster support has absorbed most of the medium from the ground and design application. Since no varnish coatings have been applied to the painted surfaces, the result is a dry, porous surface having soft colors which are similar in appearance to pastel or fresco artworks."<sup>28</sup> Thus, Nailor was able to create pellucid pastel colors reminiscent of those found in Renaissance fresco painting. However, the secco technique he used was not typical and was apparently introduced into the United States in 1932 by a Swedish muralist named Olaf Nordmark, who oversaw mural projects for the Office of Indian Affairs and with whom Nailor briefly studied.<sup>29</sup>

Today, the murals, while retaining their beauty, power, and pellucidity, have nonetheless suffered damage that can be ameliorated with professional restoration. In several areas, harm has been caused by leaks in the roof, nail holes in the walls, applications of Scotch tape, and losses resulting from crumbling plaster.

The most extreme damage has occurred on the west wall of the chamber behind the speaker's platform. When the Navajo Nation upgraded the HVAC and electrical systems, they added an electrical panel in the room adjacent to the bathroom. To feed the lines to the main room of the chamber, the wall behind the speaker's platform was penetrated, in the process damaging the mural that depicted traditional Navajo life and the contact with Spanish missionaries. The wall was concealed behind the plywood backdrop that is in place today and which bears the seal of the Navajo Nation. Restoration may be possible, although the extent of the damage is not precisely known.

Additional changes to the interior of the Council Chamber since the period of significance include the installation of fluorescent lighting in the ceiling and of a multi-media sound system. An electronic voting panel was hung on the south wall in the 1980s. Modern-day theater seating at some point replaced the hand-crafted benches in the gallery, and the wooden desks of the central floor gave way to six rows of continuous, long counters at which the delegates sit.

Following the construction of the Council Chamber in 1935, the surrounding terrain, denuded of vegetation, was leveled for parking, horses, and meeting grounds. Walkways were created with cut sandstone blocks or flagstones, as, for example, at the front entryway. Paving stones also lined the road, and a low stone wall was erected around the perimeter of the administration building to the east. Today, asphalt parking areas with concrete curbs and gutters surround the building. More than one hundred parking places are each designated with delegates' names on metal signs.

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<sup>28</sup>Report on the murals at the Navajo Nation Council Chamber, Rocky Mountain Regional Conservation Center, University of Denver, Denver, Colorado, 1979, archives of the Navajo Nation HPD, Window Rock.

<sup>29</sup>Denetsosie, interview with Gorman, July 1, 1988, and David W. Look and Carole L. Perrault, *The Interior Building: Its Architecture and Its Art* (Washington, D.C.: U. S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1986).

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From 1935 until the 1950s, the setting of the Council Chamber consisted of earth, the rock formations on three sides, and a dirt road on the east. In 1954, the BIA paved the road. The once undeveloped areas to the north and south of the Council Chamber now contain metal- and wood-frame buildings housing government offices.

Electric lights have been installed in front of the building and at the perimeters of the two lawns that flank the 30-foot-wide concrete slab now forming the entrance walkway. Six flagpoles mounted on raised square pedestals define the walkway across the slab to the front door. The flags represent the United States, the Navajo Nation, and the four states encompassed by the reservation—Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, and Utah. The lawns are bordered by a low tabular stone-masonry wall. Landscaping around the building consists of groups of Siberian Elm trees and low juniper shrubs.

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**8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:  
Nationally: X Statewide:    Locally:   

Applicable National  
Register Criteria:

A x B    C x D   

Criteria Considerations  
(Exceptions):

A    B    C    D    E    F    G   

NHL Criteria:

1

NHL Theme(s):

IV. Shaping the Political Landscape:  
2. Government institutions  
4. Political ideas, cultures, and theories

Areas of Significance:

Ethnic Heritage / Native American  
Politics / Government

Period(s) of Significance:

1934-1943

Significant Dates:

1934-1935; 1942-1943

Significant Person(s):

n/a

Cultural Affiliation:

n/a

Architect/Builder:

Architects: Mayers, Murray and Phillip (formerly Goodhue Associates)  
Builders: Office of Indian Affairs  
Navajo craftsmen /Civilian Conservation Corps

Historic Contexts:

VIII. Political and Military Affairs, 1865-1939  
H. The Great Depression and the New Deal, 1929-1941  
I. Cultural Developments: Indigenous American Populations  
D. Ethnohistory of Indigenous American Populations  
6. The Myth of the Vanishing Native  
a. Ethnic Revitalizations  
1. Changing Tribal Statuses, Political, and  
Religious Systems



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**State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.**

The Navajo Nation Council Chamber is the most significant single building in the United States symbolizing the New Deal revolution in federal Indian policy. It was designed and built to stand in declaration of economic and cultural self-determination as afforded to Native Americans by John Collier's Indian Reorganization Act of 1934. The act sought to replace old policies of detribalization, severalty, and assimilation with new policies that advocated the reconstitution of tribal organization, the restoration of a tribal land base, and the promotion of traditional Indian culture.

In its design and decoration, the Council Chamber was to assert recognition of the unique Navajo cultural contribution to mainstream America, as well as to stimulate pride among Navajos in their own heritage. It was the centerpiece of an ambitious Public Works Administration (PWA) construction program aimed at improving the quality of life on Indian reservations across the country. In both form and function, it was the most remarkable of the Indian New Deal buildings, and today is the spiritual home of the Navajo political process, embodying the development, growth, and maturity of the Navajo government from the time it occupied the building in 1936 through the end of the period of significance in 1943.

The Council Chamber is the only legislative headquarters in the United States owned by a Native American tribe which has been continuously in use by that tribe and whose design incorporates indigenous materials and architectural traditions tied to the Navajo heritage.

**Background**

Prior to the changes wrought by the Indian New Deal in the 1930s, the U. S. government had made every effort "to turn the American Indian into the Indian American" by destroying tribal communities and suppressing Indian ceremonies, languages, and arts. Acknowledging that Indian containment on reservations in the nineteenth century had not proved viable, the new policy proposed the assimilation of Indians as individuals, not tribal units, into the mainstream of American society.<sup>30</sup>

The Dawes Severalty Act of 1887 provided the means by which assimilation was to be accomplished. Hailed by Indian "rights" groups as the "Indian Emancipation Act," the Dawes Act authorized the allotment of portions of reservations to individual Indian males to whom citizenship would then be granted. In this manner, communal land-holding patterns were broken up and homesteads created in the pattern of white Americans. "Thus individualized on his own parcel of land, encouraged to cultivate it for his livelihood and to improve it for his heirs," observed Francis Prucha, "the Indian would be Christianized by zealous missionaries, educated in American customs at government schools, and [would] soon disappear as a singular element in the body politic."<sup>31</sup> Government boarding schools inculcating Christian principles were to

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<sup>30</sup>Francis Paul Prucha, in Philp, *John Collier's Crusade*, ix.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., x.

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help prepare Indians for the transformation—in the language of the day—“from the condition of a savage nomad to that of an industrious American citizen.”<sup>32</sup>

While many Indians successfully made the transition, others did not. The educational programs broke down the Indians’ heritage and cultural pride without substituting anything in its place. “Many Indians became demoralized, lost between their historic identity and the white American culture they could not totally accept. Poverty, disease, and defective education were increasingly recognized as serious problems in the Indian communities as the twentieth century advanced,” Prucha wrote.<sup>33</sup>

Ultimately, the allotment policy backfired, especially among tribes that adhered to the old ways of reservation and tribal life. These tribes became more economically isolated with the onset of the Depression. On the reservations, there was no commerce and very little industry. Agriculture or livestock-raising enabled families to eke out only a subsistence living. Poor education limited job opportunities off the reservation, and even those jobs dwindled as the Depression crippled the nation’s economy. Drought swept the Southwest, withering crops and vegetation. Starving livestock ate what grass they could find, leaving barren ground even more susceptible to erosion by the drying winds.

Among the Navajos these were especially serious times, as their economic position had been compromised by events in their history even before the Depression. In 1863 Colonel Kit Carson went on a search and destroy mission through the heart of Navajo country, ruining crops and capturing or killing livestock. In early 1864, the Navajos surrendered, and the U. S. Army forced them to make the “long walk” from their traditional homes near Fort Defiance to Fort Sumner at Bosque Redondo on the Pecos River in New Mexico, where they were held as prisoners until a treaty between them and the United States was approved in 1868. The Navajo Indian reservation was established following this incarceration of 8,000 men, women, and children.

The treaty gave the Navajos a reservation of about 3.5 million acres in eastern Arizona and western New Mexico, where the Navajos had, since the coming of the Spanish, sustained a herd-based economy. When the federal government released them to return to their former homes, each family received stock supplements. The Navajos used their government allotment of sheep to redevelop their life as herdsmen and farmers. However, the reservation treaty created an area too small to meet the needs of a pastoral society, and by the 1880s the Navajo needed more grazing land and water resources for their sheep. The government expanded the reservation several times after 1882, and by 1930 it had grown to over 14 million acres. Unfortunately, the OIA did nothing to improve livestock breeding and management. By the 1920s, some non-Navajos saw overgrazing as a critical threat to the Navajos’ future, even though the drought of the early twentieth century contributed as much to the deterioration of the rangelands. The Depression further disrupted the Navajo economy and added even more to the overgrazing situation. The Office of Indian Affairs began, and then intensified, an ill-conceived effort at

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., xi.

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stock reduction as the solution. Many Navajos fought vigorously against the policy, declaring that the problem with the land was lack of rainfall not overgrazing. By the spring of 1932, the situation in the Navajo Nation was grim.

Into this scene came John Collier, with a radically different approach to the Indian question. The election of Franklin D. Roosevelt in November 1932 gave Collier the opportunity to implement his theories. He believed that Roosevelt, “a liberal in thought and heart,” would be sympathetic to a fundamental reorganization of Indian affairs for which Collier had been lobbying about 20 years.<sup>34</sup> In early 1933, Collier sent Roosevelt a petition calling for the repeal of the Dawes Allotment Act, which had contributed to the “cultural, political, and economic disintegration” of many Indian nations.<sup>35</sup> Taking his cues from the petition, Roosevelt realized that he needed new policies to assist Native Americans in economic recovery. He selected Harold L. Ickes, a charter member of the American Indian Defense Association, to be Secretary of the Interior. The choice marked the beginning of the Indian New Deal, for shortly after taking office, Ickes chose Collier to be his Indian Affairs commissioner.

Both Collier and Ickes had demonstrated political commitments to the Navajo people long before their appointments in the Roosevelt administration. Collier championed the Navajo cause over oil lease royalties and brought it to national attention in the 1920s. Ickes joined the Indian Defense Association in 1923, a lobbying group for which Collier was executive secretary, and subsequently wrote an article suggesting that the federal treatment of American Indians constituted one of the worst episodes in American history.<sup>36</sup>

Once in office, Collier and Ickes conferred daily on the problems besetting the Native American populations. Soon, however, the administrative demands of the Department of the Interior forced Ickes to turn his attention away from Indian policy matters, leaving Collier to implement the Indian New Deal. About Collier’s plan, Collins wrote:

By 1933 Collier had developed a broad plan to preserve Indian culture and improve their standards of living. His first goal was to stop the elimination of reservations through allotment. Furthermore, he hoped to promote economic development of the reservations by removing non-Indian occupants, consolidating and expanding the land base, and by providing funds for development projects. Collier also wanted to overturn the previous policy of encouraging, even forcing, acculturation into the main body of American society. He wished to strengthen the tribes and reinforce cultural identity among their members. One means to this

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<sup>34</sup>Philp quoting Collier, *John Collier’s Crusade*, 113. Collier was born in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1884. He studied literature at Columbia University and psychology at the Collège de France. In 1907 he began a twelve-year period of experimental activities among immigrants in Manhattan. He moved to California in 1919 where he became director of the state’s adult education program. Mabel Dodge Luhan, whose salons he had attended in New York, introduced him to Indian culture in 1920 during a visit to Taos where he witnessed Indian ceremonies at the Taos Pueblo (NHL, 1960). Collier, who denounced the rampant materialism of modern American society, saw in the Pueblo Indians a surviving example of pre-industrial communal life with its sense of shared identity, values, and obligations. In 1922 he began studying current federal policy and became part of a critical reform effort to end forced acculturation and allotment of the reservations. Collier was soon the most important voice in Indian affairs outside of the federal government. See Collins, *New Deal in Arizona*, 239, n. 4.

<sup>35</sup>Philp, *John Collier’s Crusade*, p. 114.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 115.

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end was to replace the current educational system, in which many Indian children were forcibly removed from their homes and families and sent to boarding schools, with local day schools that would instill a new sense of self-respect and cultural pride. At higher levels, Collier hoped to strengthen or create stronger forms of tribal government, genuine governmental entities to allow the Indians a real measure of self-rule and control over their own resources.

The Indians did not universally approve this program. Decades of assimilationist policies had altered many Indians' identity, and some did not approve of "returning to the blanket." Several tribes in Arizona were divided between the "traditionalists" and "modernists." Many of the latter were former boarding school students, and they did not always consider boarding schools and the Americanization they received there as a negative experience. Collier did not have an appreciation of the full range of Indian cultures in America. Some tribes, such as the Hopi of Arizona, retained a strong identity and maintained many active traditions, including self-government. Other Indians were all but assimilated to white culture, had abandoned reservations, and had no interest in reviving lost traditions [such as the Five Civilized Tribes of Oklahoma]. One result of these differences was that the Indians of Oklahoma were exempted from Collier's most important legislative measure, the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934. Arizona's tribes, on the other hand, offered Collier perhaps his best opportunity to realize his goal of protecting and reviving traditional tribal culture.<sup>37</sup>

This was particularly true of the Navajos, whose reservation Collier had toured during the oil lease controversy of the 1920s. Collier, a mystic and a follower of the utopian communalism of Peter Kropotkin and William Morris, believed that Indian society provided a model of mutual cooperation that had been lost to the white world. Only by preserving and following this model, he reasoned, could the nation be saved from self-destruction. He called his discovery a "Red Atlantis."<sup>38</sup> He was impressed with the Navajos, whose cultural and religious systems he believed remained the most unaltered among Indian tribes in the United States. With the Navajos, according to Parman, "emphasis could be placed on preserving an already viable native culture rather than restoring a few remnants which had survived the inroads of assimilation. The Navajos were also ideal for implementing Collier's day-school program, . . . [and] Collier saw in the Navajos' headman system and council an opportunity to realize his goal of tribal self-government."<sup>39</sup>

Collier thus planned to capitalize on a preexisting, albeit nascent, Navajo political structure that had begun to take shape after the Treaty of 1868. Prior to the occupation of the Southwest by the United States, the Navajo existed in bands of people, usually either clans or groups of clans. They were united only by language and by tribal culture. Each band chose a chief, or a headman

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<sup>37</sup>Collins, *The New Deal in Arizona*, 239–240.

<sup>38</sup>Philp, *John Collier's Crusade*, 2–7.

<sup>39</sup>Parman, *The Navajos and the New Deal*, 31.

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to represent it at meetings called *Naach'id*, which were held once every two to four years. At these meetings, the headmen voiced their opinions on issues affecting the clans, debated solutions, and made important decisions by consensus. The Navajo assembled their last *Naach'id* in 1859, five years before their confinement at Bosque Redondo. Subsequently, the Treaty of 1868, which allowed for their release, formally established a government-to-government relationship between the United States and the Navajos, even though the Navajos still did not have a centralized system. By 1901, the Office of Indian Affairs had divided Navajo country into six districts (including Hopi) with an agency in each. The smaller areas of jurisdiction facilitated the work of each OIA agency, but it did nothing to bring the tribe together. Tribal unity did not begin to coalesce until the discovery of oil on the reservation led to the formal creation of the Navajo Tribal Council in 1923. The Navajos established the council to represent the entire tribe in the signing of mineral leases. It initially comprised one delegate and one alternate elected from each of the six districts, with a chairman and a vice chairman presiding. Upon revision, twelve delegates and twelve alternates made up the council, the number of delegates from each jurisdiction now determined by population.<sup>40</sup>

In terms of achieving the goals of the Indian New Deal, the Navajos seemed ideal. "Indeed," wrote Parman, "the Navajos' situation appeared so promising that the New Dealers enthusiastically turned the reservation into a giant pilot project where ideas could be tested before being tried on other tribes."<sup>41</sup> Completed in 1935, the Navajo Nation Council House is a dramatic physical representation of the Indian New Deal.

Collier pressed forward with his plans to transform an essentially decentralized rural reservation into a centralized government located at Window Rock. The first step in the process was to bring relief through the creation of public works programs. Collier requested that Indians as a group be included in the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) through allocations of jobs and of funds from the Public Works Administration (PWA). Out of this arrangement, a separate program was formed called the Indian Emergency Conservation Work (IECW), in which the Navajos played such a major part that Collier made them a separate division directly linked to Washington. Collier thought this division would also help develop tribal self-government and economic self-sufficiency. By the fall of 1933, the IECW employed 4,000 Indians and proposed 72 projects to be completed on reservations including Navajo, Hualapai, San Carlos, and Fort Apache.<sup>42</sup>

The IECW projects varied greatly from agency to agency, but they generally fell into the categories of resource protection, resource development, infrastructure construction, and recreational development. IECW workers completed new roads, strung phone lines, built fences on the open range, developed grass and water resources, dug wells, and worked on erosion control and herd reductions. Until budget cuts in 1937 and 1940 reduced the commitments to the

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 17.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 24.

<sup>42</sup>Collins, *The New Deal in Arizona*, 240-241.

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IECW on the Navajo Reservation, the Indian CCC brought more relief than any other New Deal program.<sup>43</sup>

The Indian population of Arizona in general and the Navajo tribe in particular were significant beneficiaries of PWA funds allocated under the Indian New Deal. The investment derived from the revolution in federal Indian policy orchestrated by Collier to preserve and promote what remained of Native American cultures as vital components of the total national culture was sizeable. Collier's Office of Indian Affairs received nearly \$7 million in PWA funds to revitalize Indian reservation life in Arizona alone.<sup>44</sup> With the money, Collier and the OIA built day schools on all the reservations, constructed dams and irrigation canals, treated eroded land, built and improved roads, and created the Navajo tribal headquarters at Window Rock.<sup>45</sup>

The Window Rock building program totaled some 50 structures at a cost of more than one million dollars.<sup>46</sup> In addition to the Council Chamber, the program included offices for the consolidated Navajo Central Agency of the Office of Indian Affairs (OIA) and housing for OIA employees. All buildings were constructed in a straightforward style. The largest of this group is the administrative building located directly across the street from the Council Chamber. It contains offices for the general superintendent, the council chairman, and other officials. Designed along very simple lines the square-shaped, one-story, native-stone structure features a central courtyard, wooden lintels, vigas, and canales. The remaining buildings, also of locally quarried stone and with simple detailing, include two additional office buildings, a recreation hall, a maintenance garage, a warehouse, and a power plant. About thirty-five houses for OIA employees stand on a mesa overlooking the administrative complex.

Although none of these buildings can compete aesthetically with the Council Chamber, the group, which today remains relatively intact, represents the OIA effort to give architectural expression to Navajo political unity during a significant period in the history of both the United States and the Navajo Nation. Donald Parman notes that "the Window Rock headquarters, along with the day schools and other buildings of the period, remains the most identifiable vestige of the New Deal era."<sup>47</sup>

In 1981, in recognition of Window Rock's significance as an historic district, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) commissioned a National Register thematic nomination for Public Works Administration buildings on the Navajo Reservation.<sup>48</sup> The nomination included the day schools

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<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 245–246.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 246. As a dispenser of PWA funds in Arizona, the OIA was second only to the Bureau of Reclamation with its Hoover Dam project.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 153.

<sup>46</sup>John Collier, "Indian Reservation Buildings in the Southwest: Mayers, Murray & Phillip, Architects," *American Architect and Architecture*, 150 (June 1937): 40.

<sup>47</sup>Donald L. Parman, *The Navajos and the New Deal* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976), 96.

<sup>48</sup>At the behest of the BIA in 1980, architectural research consultant Ellen Threinen prepared a report evaluating the architectural and historical significance of more than 500 buildings constructed by the OIA on the Navajo Reservation before 1945; see *The Navajos and the BIA: A Study of Government Buildings on the Navajo Reservation* (Window Rock, Arizona: Bureau of Indian Affairs, Navajo Area Office, September 1981). The report was to have provided a basis for an NRHP nomination on the PWA buildings at Window

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built across the reservation as well as the administrative and residential complex at Window Rock. Excluded from the nomination was the Council Chamber, as it was no longer owned by the BIA. The Secretary of the Interior transferred the ownership of the building to the Navajo Nation in 1960.<sup>49</sup> Thus, the Council Chamber is the only legislative headquarters in the United States owned by a Native American tribe which has been continuously in use by that tribe and whose design incorporates indigenous materials and architectural traditions tied to the Navajo heritage.

This was precisely Collier's goal. From the outset, he envisioned a design for the Council Chamber that would make a strong symbolic statement about the building's historic and cultural heritage. His intentions were spelled out in an OIA article announcing plans for the construction of "The First Tribal Capital" in the August 1934 issue of *Indians at Work*, which also unveiled the design (figure 1):<sup>50</sup>

On the opposite page is a picture of the architects' model of the Navajo Council House, soon to be built at Nee Alneeng, the New Navajo Capital. The Navajos are but one tribe . . . The capital is to be the seat of their government, and theirs alone. But it should be of consuming interest to all Indian people, . . . [for] the Navajos are the first tribe to erect this visible declaration of their sufficiency.

The Capitol, or Council House, is Indian. It has the traditional octagonal shape of the Navajo hogan. No doors or windows open on its north side, and the entrance door faces east. Traditionally too it will be made of materials which the Navajos have always used—adobe, stone, sticks and logs. Natural stone from the surrounding cliffs and logs of native pine will make the main building. The roof will be adobe, with wood canales (hollowed tree logs) to carry off the rain. The interior decoration and the furniture will be Navajo; Navajo artists will contribute their paintings and Navajo craftsmen their rugs and basketry.

During the period from 1933 to 1936, the largest of the PWA-sponsored efforts was the development of the San Carlos Irrigation Project for the Pima Indians, which transformed desert land into irrigable fields by constructing canals, pumping plants, and transmission lines. Second only to the San Carlos project was the construction of the administrative and residential complex at Window Rock, an initiative unique among the projects because it represented the physical manifestation of tribal self-government. Other projects included road construction and the building of day schools at the Fort Apache, Havasupai, Hopi, Papago, Pima, Salt River, and Navajo reservations.<sup>51</sup>

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Rock, which Threinen apparently drafted but which was never submitted. The State Historic Preservation Office in Phoenix has no record of such an NRHP designation, nor does the Office of the Keeper of the National Register; see Carol Shull to Roger H. Henderson, 18 December 1998, archives of the Navajo Nation Historic Preservation Department (HPD), Window Rock, Arizona.

<sup>49</sup>"Resolution of the Advisory Committee of the Navajo Tribal Council," November 1, 1960, no. ACN-197-60, archives of the Navajo Nation HPD, Window Rock.

<sup>50</sup>"The First Tribal Capital," 5–6.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, 246.

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The most controversial and ultimately destructive of Collier's New Deal initiatives was the stock reduction program that took place on several reservations in the Southwest, most tragically on Navajo land. Soil erosion experts concluded that overstocking of sheep, cattle, and goats had caused immense depletion of the rangelands. To save them government experts said the Indians needed to reduce their herds and fence grazing areas. Most reservations experienced some reductions, but the Navajos were subjected to the largest and most ruthless, thus embittering many Navajos to Collier and the New Deal. When in 1934 Collier put forth his plan for tribal reorganization (the legislation at the heart of his reform ideal), Navajo opponents used the resentment toward Collier over the reductions to reject the proposal.<sup>52</sup>

By the end of 1933, the government relief effort was in full swing, and Collier was able to focus on changing the course of federal Indian policy. In early 1934, Collier sent out to superintendents, tribal councils, and individual Indians a circular called "Indian Self-Government," which outlined his plans to reverse the land allotment policy and to reorganize Indian administration. Across the country, the responses from many Indian tribes and their superintendents were negative. Undeterred, Collier pressed forward with an omnibus bill, a single legislative measure that he hoped "would have a massive and dramatic nature, commanding the imagination of Indians and Congressmen alike."<sup>53</sup>

The Indian Reorganization Act (IRA), also known as the Wheeler-Howard Act, was the most significant piece of legislation passed during Collier's twelve-year tenure as commissioner. The act provided for the renewal of Indian political and social structures destroyed by the Dawes General Allotment Act. It sought to restore the Indians' land base, tribal self-government, provide loans for reservation improvement and resource development, and promote and support Indian education and culture. Not everyone viewed these provisions as progress, and the IRA met with opposition from Indian tribes and congressmen alike. It went through many changes during congressional hearings before being adopted. Nonetheless, when it passed in June 1934, its final provisions were some of the most significant in the history of relations between Native Americans and the federal government. The IRA ended the period of allotment and laid out the reorganization of Indian societies on the basis of constitutional tribal councils and federally chartered tribal corporations. The councils were to provide a means of self-government and the corporations to enable economic development and management of the reservations.

Still, one-third of the eligible Indian tribes in the country voted against reorganization. Collier's often high-handed tactics had alienated many Indian groups. Moreover, despite his assertions about the value of cultural pluralism, he did not fully understand the range of diversity among Indian peoples or the factionalism present on many reservations. The political and economic systems inherent in reorganization were foreign to many Indian tribes. The Papago Indians of Arizona, for example, had no words in their language for "representative" or "budget." Other Indians argued that tribal councils and elected legislatures weakened traditional leadership.

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<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 259.

<sup>53</sup>Collier in "The Purposes and Operations of the Wheeler-Howard Indian Rights Bill, February 19, 1934," cited in Philp, *John Collier's Crusade*, 140.



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The biggest blow to the IRA came from the Navajos, who rejected the bill largely because of Collier's policy of forced livestock reductions. "The Navajos were the only tribe in Arizona to reject the IRA," according to Collins, "but because they were the largest tribe in the nation, the defeat could not have been more embarrassing to Collier."<sup>54</sup>

Collier, however, did not accept the defeat. At a tribal executive meeting, he pressured the Navajo council to implement reorganization outside of the IRA. He pointed out that the council had no choice in the matter, because it had been created by a Secretary of the Interior edict in 1923 and it still operated under secretarial regulations. "We have come now to a time, it seems to me, when we need a more careful representation of the areas of the Reservation," he told the executive committee. "Secretary Ickes has concluded that there ought to be a reorganization. . . . suggest that a committee be formed, a constitutional committee, to work out a constitution . . . That Committee ought to be rather large and representative of all districts of the Reservation. It ought to meet and work out things satisfactory to the Navajos."<sup>55</sup>

The council acquiesced. It voted to abolish itself and to create an executive committee of headmen to sit on a constitutional assembly. The assembly met at the Window Rock Council Chamber in April 1937, where it declared itself to be a new tribal council and began drafting a constitution. The assembly also wrote a second document, titled "Rules for the Navajo Reservation," which Secretary Ickes approved in 1938. Today, it is called "Rules for the Navajo Council," and it remains the foundation upon which the modern Navajo Tribal Council rests.<sup>56</sup>

Although Collier's Indian New Deal and its propositions for Indian reorganization were not totally successful, the program marked a radical shift in government policy, ending the disastrous allotment program and improving the economic conditions on the reservations amidst the Depression. The Indian New Deal also began the modern era of federal relations with Native Americans. "The era," Collins has written eloquently, "is characterized by a greater respect for Indian cultures and recognition that they can contribute their distinctive qualities to the whole of American society."<sup>57</sup> This is the very premise upon which the Navajo Nation Council Chamber was built.

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<sup>54</sup>Collins, *The New Deal in Arizona*, 270.

<sup>55</sup>Collier, minutes of the Executive Committee Meeting, November 23, 1936; quoted in Robert W. Young, *A Political History of the Navajo Tribe* (Tsailé, Navajo Nation: Navajo Community College Press, 1978), 89.

<sup>56</sup>Young, *A Political History of the Navajo Tribe*, 114.

<sup>57</sup>Collins, *The New Deal in Arizona*, 270.

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**9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES****UNPUBLISHED MATERIALS****MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS**

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Phoenix, Arizona

Archives of the Navajo Nation Historic Preservation Department,  
Window Rock, Arizona

Archives of the Navajo Nation Museum, Window Rock, Arizona

Center for Southwest Research, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque

Laboratory of Anthropology, Museum of Indian Arts and Culture, Santa Fe, New Mexico

National Archives, Pacific Southwest Region, Phoenix, Arizona

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- Previously Listed in the National Register.
- Previously Determined Eligible by the National Register.
- Designated a National Historic Landmark.
- Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey: #
- Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record: #

Primary Location of Additional Data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State Agency
- Federal Agency
- Local Government
- University
- Other (Specify Repository): Navajo Nation Historic Preservation Division, Window Rock.

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**10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA**

Acreage of Property: 1.6 acres

UTM References:	<b>Zone</b>	<b>Easting</b>	<b>Northing</b>
	12	676618	3950322

## Verbal Boundary Description:

The property is located in District 18, Navajo Indian Reservation, SE/4 of Sec. 5, T 26 N, T 31 E, G & S.R.M., Window Rock, Apache County, Arizona. The boundaries of the property are indicated on the attached map entitled: "Navajo Nation Council Chamber" as surveyed on January 7, 1997.

## Boundary Justification:

The boundary comprises all of the parcel owned by the Navajo Nation historically associated with the property.

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June 16, 2004