

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

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

OMB No. 1024-0018

WOODBURY COUNTY COURTHOUSE

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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: WOODBURY COUNTY COURTHOUSE

Other Name/Site Number:

2. LOCATION

Street & Number: 620 Douglas Street

Not for publication: \_\_\_

City/Town: Sioux City

Vicinity: \_\_\_

State: IA

County: Woodbury

Code: 193

Zip Code: 51101

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: 1

Name of Related Multiple Property Listing:

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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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**Page 3****6. FUNCTION OR USE**

Historic: GOVERNMENT

Sub: Courthouse

Current: GOVERNMENT

Sub: Courthouse

**7. DESCRIPTION**

ARCHITECTURAL CLASSIFICATION:

Late 19th &amp; Early 20th Century: Prairie School

## MATERIALS:

Foundation: Granite

Walls: Brick

Roof: Rubber ballast on concrete

Other: Granite (trim)

Terra cotta (details)

## Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.

Covering nearly a city block, the Woodbury County Courthouse is one of the finest Prairie School buildings in the United States. The basic structure is a nearly square four-story structure with an eight-story tower rising from the center core. The courthouse is described at length in a 1921 review in *The Western Architect* and remarkably, the original building has not materially changed since then. This description is adapted from that article.

The west front is made up of a row of 21 brick piers with two recessed planes at either end. The facade is alive with contrasting Roman brick bands and organic terra cotta detail. The front portal is a massive example carved in granite to fit into the archway—integral to the building. The central figure represents the Law and on either side there are six figures, in a smaller scale, which represent the human tide of all ages which will pass through the portal. On the large cornice above is written "Justice and Peace have met together. Truth has sprung out of the Earth." On the north side a smaller portal is also adorned with two large scale relief figures—on the east a male and on the west a female holding a child—symbolizing the family social unit. Alphonso Iannelli of Park Ridge, Illinois, was the sculptor for almost all of the building's sculptural work. Above the door on the north side is an intricate bronze grille designed by George Elmslie. The windows and the ornamental detail, recalling Louis Sullivan's influence on Steele and Purcell and Elmslie, are embellished with stylized plant forms. At about 60 feet above the ground, the main block is terminated by a sheer granite coping and above and set back from the main block, the tower rises eight stories. On the western side of the tower, Iannelli's great eagle looks westward, symbolizing the Spirit of Progress. On the east side of the tower is a great bison modeled by K. Schneider.

The contemporary architectural review somewhat poetically describes the building as follows:

The general color tones are a rich, light brown, too deep for buff, pleasantly varied and meeting congenially the color of the granite and the unglazed, natural burned-clay color of the terra cotta. This latter has been interspersed judiciously with a rich rendering of the same material in polychrome. The colors run the gamut of the primary tones, but so deftly... handled that the eye is conscious only of a fine brilliance in the whole texture. The windows and their frames are metal and are enameled in a vivid blue with the sash picked out in a delicate gray which has almost the value of white in contrast. The sash throughout are of the casement type and filled with leaded glass of a very open and free pattern with beautifully regulated color spots giving an excellent over all value to the building as a whole.<sup>1</sup>

The Sioux City Board of Supervisors may have been somewhat startled by the design and at first objected to the plan. They readily approved it when it was established that the plan had been developed to meet as nearly as possible the county's needs and gave the county more square feet of working space for the cost than most courthouses previously built. The plan

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<sup>1</sup> *The Western Architect*, Chicago. 30:2, February 1921, pp 14-15. "Woodbury County Court House..."

set the functions most often needed by the public on the lower levels. The main floor has offices for the auditor, treasurer, recorder, and clerk that are inter-connected as well as opening out into a very large central space crowned by an enormous dome.

In this complex of first-floor offices, the northwest section is reserved for the County Clerk, including a public reception area, staff work space, the Clerk's private office, and the vaults for the storage of court cases and other records. In the southwest corner is the Treasurer's office and in the southeast corner is the office for the Auditor. Each of these offices has a public area, work space for the staff, private offices for the County Treasurer and Auditor, and a small vault area. The northeast section is occupied by the County Recorder, where deeds, liens, and mortgages are handled. As in the other offices, there is a public reception area, staff work space, the Recorder's private office, and a large vault to hold all of the records. On the east side of the floor, between the Auditor's office and the Recorder's office, is an area for the County Board of Supervisors. There is a single private office for the Supervisors and a public hearing room for Board meetings.

On the west wall facing inward to the main rotunda is an information desk behind which, facing outward to the west (main) entrance, are the two elevators. Across from the information desk, along the east wall of the rotunda, is a staircase with a short flight of steps leading to a landing where the stairway breaks to the left and right to continue up to the second floor. (The second floor is a deep balcony open to the first floor below and to the dome above.) On the rotunda's south wall is a beautiful drinking fountain decorated with glass mosaic and recently restored. The north wall has another entrance from the street.

The effect upon entering the rotunda, no matter how disagreeable the weather outdoors, is that of a delightful, radiant warmth. Photographs cannot do more than faintly suggest the glowing color. Someone's comment was: "This is like entering a spacious living room with a hospitable fire on the hearth."

The floors are a rich buff quartzite tile, the walls and piers Roman brick with great plastered spaces holding vivid mural paintings framed and enriched with delicately modeled cream terra cotta, which, in its turn, is made sparkling with colored inlays of glass mosaic. The eye travels upward, and sees wonderful terra cotta terminals of the supporting piers engaging a spreading canopy of beautifully ornamented plaster, and carrying as a great crown a wonderful glass dome designed as a huge light reflector and distilling medium. The dome is lighted by clerestory windows above the main roof, and through it at all times of day comes a flood of richly tinted light.

The mural paintings, done by John W. Norton of Chicago, are especially beautiful and noteworthy. The artist has definitely applied his genius to the work to be done in this particular spot. He has preserved the sense of wall and does not lead the eye through and beyond the building.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

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These four murals are installed on the second level and can easily be seen from the main floor as well as from the balconies above. They are done in bright clear colors and the subjects are varied. The Administration of Justice, represented by a primitive outdoor court, is located over the west entrance. On the south wall is a mural depicting Farm Life, a serene tableau of the young farmer returning from the fields to his waiting family. On the north wall is Urban Life—at least what urbanity was in the early 20th century in the rural mid-West—and over the stair on the east wall the mural is a memorial to the young who served in World War I.

There are four principal court rooms on the second floor, each located in one of the building's corners. They are fully equipped with all the necessary subsidiary rooms for the judge, bailiff, attorneys, and witnesses. Each courtroom has a large beautiful skylight for letting in the maximum amount of daylight.

The court rooms are splendid. There is an air of dignified serenity and peace about them. The eye is soothed by the pleasant color scheme which runs from the black and gold marble, through the warm brown of the brick and the blue of the metal work to a quiet silvery gray on the seats and desks. The lighting fixtures are beautiful in their design. Free use of the "trough" system of indirect lighting is noted here as well as elsewhere in the building....

Two assembly rooms are provided for the jurors who ordinarily must appear at the court house at a fixed time and loaf about the court room or the corridors until they find out whether or not they must go on duty. The assembly rooms afford them places where they may smoke, read or talk while they are waiting and the bailiff can readily find them when they are wanted.

The jurors' suite for each court room with consultation room, dormitory, toilet, bath, is on a mezzanine floor above the judges' and attorneys' rooms. This suite is commanded by a bailiff's room in each case. There is ample provision for toilets, both public and private, and there is a rest room for women on the court floor.

The sheriff's office is also on the court floor and contains the normal means of communication between the courts and the jail. The latter is located in the building and is self-contained with its own means of ingress and egress. It has completely modern equipment of sanitary, steel, tool-proof cells grouped in tiers and sections so that the segregation of the various types of prisoners may be successfully managed. The jail elevator is automatic and the outside means of communication with the jail is through the alley. There are detention cells for male, female and juvenile prisoners and a matron's room for the latter, of course thoroughly private. The jailor has a well-appointed modern apartment for his living purposes. Food for the prisoners is prepared in the jail kitchen in the basement and served by means of automatic, electric dumbwaiters. There is a laundry in connection with the jail equipment.

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The tower is really a little office building with elevator service, and houses the minor functions—county attorney, county engineer, superintendent of schools, court reporter, law library, etc. In these upper offices there is permanent light, ventilation, convenience, and quiet, ideal conditions for good work....

There is natural ventilation by means of windows. Some day some "economical" board of supervisors may decide to cut down expenses by shutting off the fans. This condition has been met in the building we are discussing. The basement extends beyond the building lines to the street curb, is both naturally and artificially ventilated, and, besides a modern heat, light and power plant, contains some very satisfactory minor offices, janitor's quarters, etc., and a great volume of space for future storage purposes. The space is arranged so that each department may overflow its storage space into the basement as needed. For example, the clerk of the courts occupies the northwest part of the building. His office for the general public is on the first floor and here also is his great vault for the court records. His office for convenience when court is in session is on the courts, or second, floor, and his overflow vault space is directly below in the basement. He has an automatic electric elevator for his own use in passing up and down within his own "zone of influence."

The building as a whole is strictly fireproof. The only woodwork is a little for ornamental purposes, and the desks and chairs. All doors, windows, filing cases, are metal. Floors are all terrazzo, tile, cork or linoleum. Marble is used with fine effect in the rotunda and court rooms and sparingly elsewhere. There is evidence on every hand throughout the building that the selection of materials was very carefully made and the inspection and workmanship of the highest order. There is a sense of the fitness of things not often manifested in a public building. The cost of the building was relatively low. The contracts were let before prices had advanced to anywhere near their present level.

The building was completed for about \$850,000.00 and it is safe to say that it could not be duplicated at the present time [1921] for less than a million and a quarter. Roughly the building contains about 1,600,000 cubic feet and cost a little over 50 cents per cubic foot completely equipped ready for use.<sup>3</sup>

The Woodbury County Courthouse is a landmark which has never—due to its geographic isolation—received the notice it so richly deserves. In many respects it summarizes the best in midwest architecture of the previous quarter century, harking back to Sullivan's Wainwright Building in St. Louis (1890), Wright's project for the Smith Bank (1904), and Purcell and Elmslie's own masterpiece, the Merchant's Bank in Winona (1911-12).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *The Western Architect*. Chicago, Volume 30, February 1921, pp. 18-20.

<sup>4</sup> Brooks, H. Allen. *The Prairie School*. W.W. Norton & Co., New York & London, 1972, p. 301.

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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 \_\_\_ B \_\_\_ C X D \_\_\_

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions):

A \_\_\_ B \_\_\_ C \_\_\_ D \_\_\_ E \_\_\_ F \_\_\_ G \_\_\_

NHL Criteria: 4

NHL Theme(s): XVI. Architecture  
P. Prairie

Areas of Significance: Architecture

Period(s) of Significance: 1918

Significant Dates: 1916-1918

Significant Person(s):

Cultural Affiliation: N/A

Architect/Builder: William L. Steele (1875-1949)  
George Grant Elmslie (1871-1952)  
William Gray Purcell (1880-1965)  
Paul D. Cook, Structural Engineer  
B.A. Broom, Mechanical Engineer



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

In 1915, the architects Purcell and Elmslie were at the height of their careers when they undertook their biggest commission—far from a large metropolitan center. The result was the Woodbury County Court House in Sioux City, Iowa, the only major civic building by a Prairie School architect. Today, the building is in pristine condition, fulfilling its original function, and is the source of great civic pride.

Sioux City was a busy outpost in 1857, supplying forts and agencies on the upper Missouri River and serving traders and trappers returning from the Black Hills. With the construction of a railroad from Dubuque on the Mississippi River across Iowa; the population had swelled by 1857. Judge John C. Cook contracted to build a courthouse for \$848.08, but only the foundations were laid. By 1875, a courthouse had been started and it was completed by 1878. It was used until 1918, when the current building was ready.

In June 1914, the voters approved the proposal for a new Court House; in September 1914, the voters approved the present site. In January 1915, William M. Steele, of Sioux City, was chosen as the architect. Preliminary sketches for the court house were approved by the Board of Supervisors on March 15, 1915. In the local press and in public meetings the plans were condemned as "radical" in design. There was a thorough misunderstanding of what the supervisors and the architect wanted to do. In spite of the protests, the final design was approved by the supervisors on December 5, 1915. On February 15, 1916, the contract was awarded to Splady, Albee and Smith, Contractors, of Minneapolis. On July 10, 1916, the cornerstone was laid. The building was finished and occupied on March 1, 1918.<sup>1</sup>

William Steele had graduated from the University of Illinois in 1896 and then joined Louis Henry Sullivan's staff as a draftsman. Having won the limited local competition for this commission, Steele, now of Sioux City, turned immediately to two former colleagues in the office of Sullivan—William Gray Purcell and George Grant Elmslie. After leaving Sullivan's firm, Purcell and Elmslie had moved to Minneapolis where they gained a reputation for beautifully finished practical structures. In the beginning, Steele expected Elmslie to design the lavish decoration typical of his mentor Sullivan. What evolved was the complete design of the entire building. Elmslie moved to Sioux City and completed the final design and supervised the sculptor, muralist and construction, while Steele was officially the principal architect.

As with the few Sullivan buildings that survive, the detailing of the main spaces is rich and exuberant.

The entire building, interior and exterior, is covered with a warm tan Roman brick (with raked horizontal joints) and then overlaid with an efflorescence of glazed terra-cotta ornament, white on the interior and polychrome on the exterior. Overall the building gives the impression of an articulated frame.... The side walls are composed of substantial blank walls, intercut with superb leaded glass windows (small for offices and large for courtrooms), protected by thin cantilevered slabs. The rear side, the jail entrance, is also of interest with its functional disposition of parts and integrated fire escapes. Most exciting though is the tower with its multiplanes and dramatic triangular prow topped by an eagle designed by Iannelli....

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<sup>1</sup> Sioux City Public Museum Bulletin, Article by John F. Schmidt, 1966, p. 3.

The lobby with its articulated piers, balconies jutting forward, colorful murals, great swaths of terra-cotta, and a large, leaded-glass dome simply overwhelms the viewer, and is one of the most exciting spaces in not only Iowa but the United States. Perhaps the glass dome, not visible on the exterior, is unsettling. It projects into the bottom story of the tower which is given over completely to windows for lighting. Next to the pyrotechnics of the lobby, the courtrooms are quiet spaces and yet they are the best features of the design. Elegant leaded-glass windows along the sides; tent-shaped skylights; brick lower walls topped by plain plaster; simple wooden and black marble trim; brick judges' benches; and custom designed electroliers give the courtrooms a rarely achieved humane quality. In sum, the Woodbury County Courthouse is a remarkable building, the only major public building in the Prairie Style.<sup>2</sup>

As H. Allen Brooks has observed, there is a resemblance to Frank Lloyd Wright's interiors at the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo, now lost to history.

With a lushness approaching that of Mayan architecture, these terra cotta surfaces contrast sharply with other parts of the interior such as the almost austere courtrooms with their tinted plaster walls and precise wood trim. A light, spacious dome crowns this lobby, its prominent ribs sheathed with terra cotta and the intervals filled with colored glass set in geometric patterns. Illumination, natural by day and artificial by night, floods through the dome which, however, finds no exterior expression. It rises beneath the tower, from whose lower windows it receives its light.<sup>3</sup>

George Grant Elmslie's professional life, like Sullivan's, was filled with tragedy and despair. Although he competed with Frank Lloyd Wright throughout his lifetime, Elmslie made the most significant contribution to what we know of Sullivan's career. Toward the end of his life, in the late 1930s and early 1940s, he was Sullivan's "literary executor," depositing items at appropriate institutions. In 1944, the American Institute of Architects finally awarded their gold medal to Sullivan, two decades after his death. George Elmslie received the honor in 1946 because he was originally instrumental in pointing out that Sullivan was the world's first truly great modernist.

Although done with Purcell and Steele, this Courthouse is Elmslie's civic masterpiece and it became the most successful commission of his entire career.

Like Wright, Elmslie and Steele practiced Sullivan's new architecture, combining modern construction techniques with a naturalistic aesthetic. In his superb designs for St. Louis' Wainwright Building (1890), Chicago's Stock Exchange Building (1893), and Buffalo's Guaranty Building (1894-95), Sullivan had pioneered a style that offered a dignified alternative to mimicking the classical style in the design of public buildings.... [They] paid homage to their mentor with the magnificent Woodbury County Courthouse, the largest structure built along Prairie School lines in the United States. Today, sixty years after its completion, the Steele courthouse remains a

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<sup>2</sup> Wilson, Richard Guy and Sidney K. Robinson. *The Prairie School in Iowa*, University of Iowa Press, Ames. 1977. pp. 24-25.

<sup>3</sup> Brooks, H. Allen. *The Prairie School*. W.W. Norton & Co., New York & London, 1972, p. 301.

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brilliant reminder of the richness of the Sullivan tradition.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> William Silag. "William Steele's Silent Music," *Palimpsest*, Iowa State Historical Society. Des Moines 1981, p. 45.

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**9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES**

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Garner, John S., Editor. *The Midwest in American Architecture*. University of Illinois Press, Urbana. 1991.

Gebhard, David. "William Gray Purcell and George Grant Elmslie." Ph.D. thesis, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis. 1957.

Gebhard, David and Gerald Mansheim. *Buildings of Iowa*. Oxford University Press, New York. 1993.

Silag, William. "William Steele's Silent Music." *Palimpsest*. Iowa State Historical Society, Des Moines. 1981.

Wilson, Richard Guy and Sidney K. Robinson. *The Prairie School in Iowa*. Iowa State University Press, Ames. 1977.

"Woodbury County Courthouse, Sioux City, Iowa." *Western Architect*, Chicago, Illinois, 30:2, February 1921.

Zabel, Craig and Susan Munshower, Editors. *American Public Architecture*. "George Grant Elmslie, Turning the Jewel Box into a Bank Home." Vol. 5. University Park, Pennsylvania State University. 1989. Pp. 228-270.

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: University of Minnesota  
 Other (Specify Repository):

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**10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA**

Acreage of Property: Less than 2 acres

UTM References: Zone Easting Northing  
A 14 713190 4708030

## Verbal Boundary Description:

Lots 3, 4, and 5 including Block 4. Parcel 017295. Sioux City, East Addition, Woodbury County, Iowa.

## Boundary Justification:

The boundary includes the original parcel that has historically been considered the Woodbury County Courthouse and which maintains its historic integrity.

**11. FORM PREPARED BY**

Name/Title: Carolyn Pitts, Architectural Historian  
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Date: November 8, 1994

National Park Service/WASO/History Division (418): December 7, 1994