

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

For NPS use only

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

received FEB 7 1985
date entered

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

1. Name

historic Wisconsin Telephone Company Building

and/or common Security Building

2. Location

street & number 125 North 4th Street not for publication

city, town La Crosse vicinity of

state Wisconsin code 55 county La Crosse code 063

3. Classification

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

4. Owner of Property

name Security Holdings Ltd.

street & number 125 North 4th Street

city, town La Crosse vicinity of state Wisconsin 54601

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. La Crosse County Court House - Register of Deeds

street & number 400 North 4th Street

city, town La Crosse state Wisconsin 54601

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

Wisconsin Inventory of
title Historic Places

has this property been determined eligible? yes no

date 1977 federal state county local

depository for survey records State Historical Society of Wisconsin

city, town Madison state Wisconsin 53706

7. Description

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

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

The Wisconsin Telephone Company is a two-story, gold-tone brick structure built on a stone foundation on the southwest corner of North Fourth and State streets. It exhibits a five bay north facade on State Street and a three bay east facade with a one bay addition fronting on North Fourth Street. A projecting terra cotta cornice ornamented by Classical mouldings and dentils with a parapet above, and minor cornice above the rusticated lower story divides the structure horizontally. The original paired windows within a common moulding are arranged with single windows in the center and on either side creating a 1-2-1-2-1 rhythm in the upper story. All of the second story frames and aprons project slightly from the surface. A lion moulded in terra cotta originally holding a bell and a terra cotta cornice visually suggested by brackets of the same material projects over the entrance on the north facade. The double openings, one door and one window are trimmed with terra cotta mouldings of Classical design. The original wrought iron fence defining the entrance to the basement remains on the north side of the structure.

In preparation for its use as the Security Savings Bank in 1920, the building was remodeled and the lower east facade altered. In 1920, Otto Merman designed the present one-story, one-bay entrance projecting from the structure on the east side.¹ Designed in a Neo-classical manner sensitive to the original design, fluted, Doric columns support the upper entablature and frame the double leafed copper entrance door. A decorative metal grill covers the transom window above the entrance. "Security Savings Bank" is inscribed on the frieze. Terra cotta classical mouldings in a pattern similar to that on the original structure decorates the cornice of the entablature. At the same time the window openings were enlarged on the lower story of the east facade and in the east two bays of the north facade. Windows of plate glass with a transom of small lights above for ventilation purposes replaced the double hung windows.

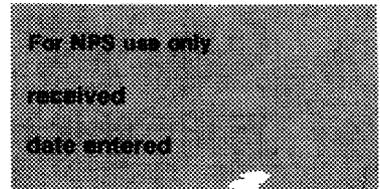
The Wisconsin Telephone Company building was further altered in 1928 when Otto Merman designed a one-bay addition for the south side to provide a separate entrance to the second floor as well as a second entrance to the lobby of the Security Savings Bank.² In 1952, a concrete block addition was constructed at the rear of Merman's addition, making it flush with the rear wall of the original building.³ Stone, one-story additions designed by Boyum, Schubert and Sorenson flanking the projecting 1920 entrance were added in 1954 but have been removed in the recent restoration.⁴ In the process, some bricks on the northeast cornice needed to be replaced.

The interior of the Wisconsin Telephone Company building has been extensively remodeled repeatedly. The first occurred when it was converted from a telephone company to a bank and office building. Extensive interior remodeling occurred again in 1928 and through the years when it was converted to office use and finally during the recent restoration occurring in 1983. Some pre-cast plaster cornice moulding and marble flooring remain from the bank lobby, two large walk-in safes constructed when the building was built, bronze grill doors on the inside of the copper entrance doors are features on the interior that have survived the many remodeling efforts.

The Wisconsin Telephone Company building is the only historic structure to remain on the corner of North Fourth and State streets. Once a prominent corner that contained the court house, the post office and the Stoddard Hotel, the area has suffered almost complete demolition. The Wisconsin Telephone Company Building is tied to the historic commercial district to the south by the adjacent Rivoli Building.

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7. DESCRIPTION (continued)

NOTES

- ¹Blueprints by Otto Merman dated September 11, 1920, owner: Security Holdings, Ltd., La Crosse, WI.
- ²Blueprints by Merman and Shogstad dated November 7, 1928, owner: Security Holdings, Ltd., La Crosse, WI.
- ³Blueprints by Boyum, Schubert and Sorenson dated April 24, 1952, owner: Security Holdings, Ltd., La Crosse, WI.
- ⁴Blueprints by Boyum, Schubert and Sorenson dated October, 1954, owner: Security Holdings, Ltd., La Crosse, WI.

8. Significance

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

Specific dates 1901–19; 1920, 1928¹ **Builder/Architect** Herman J. Esser; Hugo Schick; Otto Merman²

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

The Wisconsin Telephone Company building is architecturally significant as the best extant example of its type in the downtown commercial district of La Crosse. The two-story commercial building is a small brick representative of Neo-classicism expressed in a severely restrained manner by H. J. Esser in a design reminiscent of the late 19th century to early 20th century North European Neo-classicism. The Neo-classic design originally modified by the local architect in charge of construction H. Schick, later was altered in 1920 and again in 1928 by local architect Otto Merman in a manner sensitive to the original Neo-classic design. The building is historically significant because it represents the early history of telecommunications in La Crosse and because it represents a landmark in the field of communications. The Wisconsin Supreme Court established legal precedent when it ordered the La Crosse branch of the Wisconsin Telephone Company to permit the locally-owned La Crosse Telephone Company access to its long-distance telephone lines. This precedent profoundly influenced the era and subsequent communications history.

Architecture

The basic design of the building created by Herman J. Esser of Milwaukee in 1900 apparently was altered somewhat by the local architect Hugo Schick who supervised its construction in 1901. According to the Morning Chronicle of April 11, 1900, "plans and specifications for the new building to be erected at the corner of 4th and State have been received by architect Schick. They were drawn by architect H. J. Esser of Milwaukee."³ The construction was delayed until March 1901 when the Morning Chronicle reported that word from New York had been received by Schick's office to let the contract for the new telephone company building.⁴

First associated with the architect Nader of Madison, Esser worked in Milwaukee from the late 1890's until the 1930's.⁵ Esser frequently received commissions by the Wisconsin Telephone Company and Milwaukee Electric Company. The Wisconsin Telephone Company building at Milwaukee and Racine were also designed by Esser.⁶ From other structures designed by Herman Esser, it may be assumed that he designed in a highly articulated Neo-classic style.

Hugo Schick, a German architect who received his architectural degree in 1877 from the Academy of Arts in Austria, came to La Crosse in 1886 where he was in partnership with Stoltze until 1899.⁷ His partnership with Roth was formed in late 1901.⁸ Schick along with his partners, Stoltze and Roth, is responsible for the designs of the majority of the large structures in the downtown, including the Barron Building in 1891, the Rehffuss Building in 1894 and the Doerflinger Department Store in 1903.

Exhibiting a similar form, cornice style and rusticated lower story as in Esser's design of the Milwaukee Telephone Company, the La Crosse building does not have the highly articulated upper facade and arched windows of his Milwaukee utility company buildings. The La Crosse Building exhibits the rectangular window enclosed by restrained classical mouldings as found in the 1903 Doerflinger store by Schick and Roth.

When the Wisconsin Telephone building was reused as the Security Savings Bank in 1920, the structure was remodeled and a new entrance of a similar Neo-classical style was designed by the Local architect, Otto Merman. Starting as a draftsman for Parkinson and Dockendorff,

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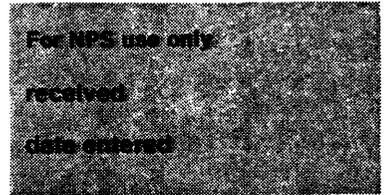
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8. SIGNIFICANCE (continued)

Otto Merman, active till his death in 1935, originally was associated with Percy Bentley and the Prairie School style.⁹ By the time Bentley moved permanently to Minneapolis (c. 1919), Merman had begun to move toward period styles. Many of Merman's public buildings such as the Washburn School in 1921, the La Crosse Vocational School in 1923, and Abraham Lincoln School in 1924, were influenced by the Neo-classical style. Other structures in downtown La Crosse influenced by Neo-classicism remain in La Crosse, such as the Klein Building of 1891 and the Gund Building of 1894, both built at the corner of Fourth and Jay remain in La Crosse. However, the Telephone Company Building is the only extant building influenced by Neo-classicism to have retained its integrity.

Located in a potential historic district dominated by Romanesque influenced structures, as well as vernacular and later "Modern" styles, the Wisconsin Telephone Company Building is the best remaining commercial representative of the historic Neo-classic style in La Crosse. The last remaining historic building on a once prestigious corner, the Wisconsin Telephone Company Building is a "jewel" in a city steadily losing its historic fabric.

Communications

Three years after Alexander Graham Bell demonstrated his invention to a group of Boston investors in 1876, the telephone came to La Crosse, Wisconsin. On May 1, 1879, the first connection was made between P. S. Davidson's boathouse at the La Crosse Landing and his sawmill in North La Crosse. By 1881, there were thirty-two lines with sixty-five telephones operating in the city.¹⁰

That same year that Davidson connected his two businesses, Charles H. Haskins of Milwaukee formed the Haskins Company, the predecessor of the Wisconsin Telephone Company. The Haskins Company acted as an agent for the Bell Telephone Company, establishing telephone exchanges throughout the state. By 1926, the Wisconsin Telephone Company, handled sixty percent of the telephone business in the state.¹¹

In 1881 the Wisconsin Telephone Company opened an exchange at 108 Main Street.¹² The city directories for the City of La Crosse indicate that a "Telephone Exchange" was operated by C. F. Eckel, manager of the Northwest & Western Union Telegraph Company, in 1880 at 109 Main. It seems that Eckels may have operated a short-lived independent exchange until he was taken over by the Wisconsin Telephone Company in 1881 and moved from 109 Main to 108 Main. At this time it still operated in conjunction with the telegraph.¹³

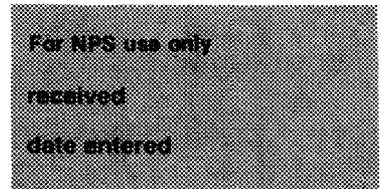
By 1884, the entire business operated by itself in the Servis Building at 109-111 Main -- their residence only a few years before. A few years later, the exchange was moved to 230 Main Street, where it remained for ten years.

In 1900, recognizing the growing needs of North La Crosse, a northside exchange was opened at 813 Rose Street. One year later, the main office moved for the last time, to the building under construction at 123-125 North 4th Street.¹⁴

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8. SIGNIFICANCE (continued)

The Wisconsin Telephone Company was without competitors in La Crosse until 1893, when the La Crosse Telephone Company was founded by some of the city's most prominent businessmen. Among them were I. H. Moulton, W. E. Sawyer, D. D. and George MacMillan, John M. Holley, and W. W. Cargill. Competition had not developed until this time because Bell's original telephone patent was in effect. When his patent expired in 1893, scores of independent companies were formed throughout the country. The La Crosse Telephone Company was one of the first independents to form in Wisconsin.¹⁵ Though founded in 1893, the La Crosse Telephone Company was not competitive until 1895, because telephone lines had to be strung throughout the city and a switchboard constructed in the Bartel Building at 413 Main Street.¹⁶

Independent telephone companies were a boon to farmers, small townfolk, and businessmen. Service from the Wisconsin Telephone Company was difficult and expensive to get. Hence, at first, the independents were more concerned with service and lower rates than with profits. The original rates of the La Crosse Telephone Company, known as the "New Phone," were \$2.50 a month for a single business line and \$1.50 a month for a single residence line. These undercut the rates of the Wisconsin Telephone Company, known as the "Old Phone," and resulted in very active competition. The Wisconsin Telephone Company rates were soon less than half of those originally charged by the La Crosse Telephone Company.¹⁷

Competition initially benefitted the customer, but soon became cutthroat and destructive. Though each company's rates became lower, there were no connections between the two companies. Owners of "new phones" couldn't talk to owners of "old phones." Businesses were forced to purchase the services of both companies, especially as long distance lines came into operation. Because the Bell System held exclusive rights to the long lines only purchasers of Wisconsin Telephone Company services could place long distance calls.¹⁸

Some people eventually realized the necessity of connecting the two lines. The first independents to connect with the Wisconsin Telephone Company were ostracized from the Wisconsin Independent Telephone Association, established to help the independents compete with the national company. Some independents sold out to Wisconsin Telephone Company. In Madison, the Dane County Telephone Company, founded in 1893, was bought out in 1909. But in the same year in La Crosse, loyalty to anything local prevented a takeover of the La Crosse Telephone Company by Wisconsin Telephone.¹⁹

Two years earlier, in 1907, the Wisconsin Railroad Commission (predecessor to the Wisconsin Public Service Commission) was given the power to regulate telephone companies. One of the commission's first moves was to require that all telephone companies open their books to public scrutiny. This took the edge off the cutthroat competition and paved the way for the takeover bids. The Wisconsin Telephone Company grew rapidly, locating its offices and exchanges in the larger cities and towns while the independents held forth in the rural areas and small towns. The independent La Crosse Telephone was a glaring exception to this; La Crosse was the fifth largest city in Wisconsin in 1910.²⁰

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8. SIGNIFICANCE (continued)

Conflict over long distance connections continued between the independents and the Wisconsin Telephone Company. It was especially strong in La Crosse because of its large market. Finally, the La Crosse Telephone Company filed suit against Wisconsin Telephone to allow these connections. In 1916, the Wisconsin Supreme Court ruled against Wisconsin Telephone, forcing the Bell System to connect La Crosse Telephone with the nationwide network. This precedent would not only affect telecommunications in La Crosse, but it would have a profound effect on subsequent telecommunications history. The Bell System would now have to allow connections to its long-lines by other independent companies, thus making it more difficult for Bell to monopolize the industry.²¹

The only advantage that Wisconsin Telephone held over the local company thus was destroyed. Having no need for two telephones and preferring a locally owned company to a national one, subscribers began to switch over to the La Crosse Telephone Company exclusively. Within three years of the Supreme Court's decision, the Wisconsin Telephone Company was out-of-business in La Crosse.²²

The Wisconsin Telephone Company building remained empty for a year or so before the Security Savings Bank purchased it and moved its operation from 110 North 4th Street to the 127 North 4th Street location. The bank was founded in 1897 and located in the basement of the Batavian Bank. It was an outgrowth of the investment and insurance company run by Henry Magill and E. R. Burke in the same location since 1893. Magill had been one of the co-founders of the Exchange State Bank in North La Crosse.²³

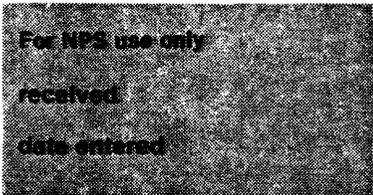
The Security Savings Bank, with Magill as cashier, Burke as vice president, and local merchant, L. W. Foster, as president, moved to 110 North 4th Street in 1900. It remained a small operation, with a total capitalization and surplus of \$72,000 at the time it moved into the old Wisconsin Telephone Company building.

In the same year, the Batavian Bank possessed capital and surplus to the tune of \$550,000 and the National Bank of La Crosse similarly held \$750,000.

The Security Savings Bank was one of the many small banks that didn't survive the Great Depression. It remained "in liquidation" until the United States entered World War II, when it finally closed its doors. The building was then used for a variety of public and private offices.²⁴

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8. SIGNIFICANCE (continued)

NOTES

- ¹La Crosse (WI) Morning Chronicle, March 16, 1901. Blueprints by Otto Merman, September 11, 1920; blueprints by Merman and Shogstad, November 7, 1928, both owned by Security Holdings, Ltd., La Crosse, WI.
- ²Ibid., La Crosse (WI) Morning Chronicle, April 11, 1901.
- ³Ibid.
- ⁴Ibid., March 16, 1901.
- ⁵Wisconsin State Journal, January 19, 1957.
- ⁶Commission of H. C. Esser, Historic Preservation Commission, Department of City Development, Milwaukee, WI; La Crosse (WI) Press, February 16, 1900.
- ⁷Biographical History of La Crosse, Trempealeau, and Buffalo Counties (1892), p. 179.
- ⁸La Crosse City Directory, 1901.
- ⁹La Crosse City Directory, 1910-1935.
- ¹⁰History of La Crosse County, 1881, p. 633.
- ¹¹Harry Barsantee, "History and Development of the Telephone in Wisconsin," Wisconsin Magazine of History, 1926, p. 155.
- ¹²W. F. Goodrich, "Telephone Systems in La Crosse," La Crosse County Historical Society Sketches, Vol. 4, 1938, p. 63.
- ¹³Ibid.; La Crosse City Directory, 1880-1884.
- ¹⁴La Crosse City Directory, 1900-1902; Warranty Deed, Emma J. Law to Wisconsin Telephone Company, Lot 10, Block 24, City of La Crosse, July 12, 1899.
- ¹⁵Barsantee, "...Telephone in Wisconsin," p. 155-156.
- ¹⁶La Crosse City Directory, 1893-1898; Goodrich, "Telephone Systems...", p. 64.
- ¹⁷Barsantee, "...Telephone in Wisconsin," p. 156; Goodrich, "Telephone Systems...", p. 64.
- ¹⁸Barsantee, ibid., p. 156-157; Goodrich, ibid., p. 64-66.
- ¹⁹Ibid.
- ²⁰Barsantee, ibid., p. 157-158; Robert Nesbit, Wisconsin: A History (Madison, 1973), p. 549.
- ²¹Wisconsin Telephone Company, Appellant, vs. Railroad Commission of Wisconsin and others, Respondents, 162 Wis. 383. (1916).
- ²²La Crosse City Directory, 1917, 1919, 1921.
- ²³La Crosse City Directory, 1890-1900.
- ²⁴Ibid., 1901-1955.

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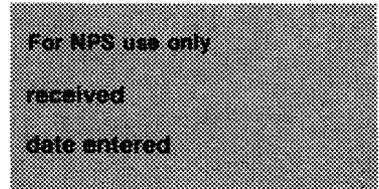
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9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

La Crosse City Directory, 1880-1955.

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Harry Barsantee, "History and Development of the Telephone in Wisconsin,"
Wisconsin Magazine of History, 1926.

W. F. Goodrich, "Telephone Systems in La Crosse," La Crosse County Historical
Society Sketches, Vol. 4, 1938, p. 63.

11. FORM PREPARED BY (continued)

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George C. Brown

N/A

153 Dunning Street

Madison, Wisconsin 53704

(608) 244-2515