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United States Department of the Interior National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

NATIONAL REGISTER

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

1. Name of Property

historic name St. Louis County District Courthouse other names/site number NA

2. Location

street & number 300 South Fifth Avenue city, town Virginia state Minnesota code MN county St. Louis code 137 zip code 55792

3. Classification

Ownership of Property: private, public-local (checked), public-State, public-Federal. Category of Property: building(s) (checked), district, site, structure, object. Number of Resources within Property: Contributing 1, Noncontributing 0, Total 1.

Name of related multiple property listing: NA

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

4. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets (checked) does not meet the National Register criteria. See continuation sheet. Signature of certifying official: Ian R. Stewart, Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer, Minnesota Historical Society. Date: 5/12/92.

In my opinion, the property meets () does not meet the National Register criteria. See continuation sheet. Signature of commenting or other official: Date: State or Federal agency and bureau:

5. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby, certify that this property is:

- entered in the National Register. (checked) See continuation sheet. determined eligible for the National Register. () See continuation sheet. determined not eligible for the National Register. removed from the National Register. other, (explain):

entered in the National Register. Signature of the Keeper: [Signature] Date of Action: 6/18/92

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Government: Courthouse

Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Government: Courthouse

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(enter categories from instructions)

Beaux Arts Classicism

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation Concrete

walls Brick

Terra Cotta

roof Tar and Gravel

other

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

The St. Louis County District Courthouse is the solitary building occupying Virginia's courthouse square, a city lot measuring 256' x 325'. City schools occupy the lots directly across Fifth Avenue to the west, and residential and religious buildings are located on the remaining facing blocks.

Executed in the Beaux Arts Classicism style, the original 1910 courthouse faces west and has a 1921 addition on the east (rear) wall. The two-story with raised basement building is rectangular in plan with a three bay pavilion and two bay end wings. The facade is accentuated by the two-story pavilion, which has four pairs of engaged, fluted Ionic columns and the main entrance framed with an ornamental overdoor. Raised panels, garlands, and egg-and-dart molding decorate each bay between the first and second floors, and keystones highlight the upper floor windows. White terra cotta covers the pavilion as well as the foundation, water table, window sills, and cornice. The concrete walls are faced with brick which is rusticated at the corners to simulate quoins. The end bays have classical balustrades while the central section has a slightly higher parapet faced with pilasters and cartouches. Another smaller entrance on the north elevation is enframed with terra cotta and classical detailing.

In 1921, a large addition was constructed at the rear of the building. Although more subdued, the new section was made of identical materials and built to the same height as the original courthouse. It was designed by Croft and Boerner and built by the National Contracting Company.

The interior is arranged around a two-story central rectangular space covered by a skylight. Interior spaces have intact woodwork, doors, terrazzo floors, and ornamental ceilings blemished only by false ceilings in parts of the lower level. The ceiling of the entrance has classical details including modillions, acanthus leaves, and egg-and-dart molding. A staircase with an ornate iron balustrade gives access to the basement and upper floors. Walls are covered with marble wainscoting and exposed beams highlight the ceilings.

Original double hung sash windows were replaced in 1979 with aluminum frames on the basement and first floors and glass block on the rear windows of the second story. A new glass and metal entrance and one-story brick jail were built on the east and south walls in 1982, and a diminutive, one-story brick enclosure was added on the north wall in 1985. Because the glass and metal entrance is on the rear of the building, and the jail addition is only six feet high and made of compatible materials, neither of these alterations adversely affect the integrity of the building.

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8. Statement of Significance

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

nationally statewide locally

Applicable National Register Criteria A B C D

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

Areas of Significance (enter categories from instructions)

Period of Significance

Significant Dates

Architecture
Politics/Government

1910-1941

1910
1921

Cultural Affiliation

NA

Significant Person

NA

Architect/Builder

Bray & Nystrom, architects (1910)

Croft & Boerner, architects (1921)

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

Under National Register Criterion A, the St. Louis County District Courthouse in Virginia is significant in the area of Politics/Government because for over eighty years it has served as the center of county government on Minnesota's Iron Range. Constructed in 1910 and enlarged in 1921, the building represents a significant milestone in the development of local self-government in the state, as the steadily-growing city of Virginia successfully lobbied for the creation of a separate judicial district within St. Louis County and the construction of a new courthouse in which judges, commissioners, clerks, supervisors, and others could administer a variety of essential services for Iron Range residents. The courthouse is also significant within the architectural context of Virginia as a good example of the Beaux Arts Classical style. Under the statewide preservation plan, the property relates to two historic contexts: Northern Minnesota Lumbering, 1870-1930s, and Minnesota's Iron Ore Industry, 1880s-1945.

Permanent settlement in northern St. Louis County began in the early 1880s when confirmed rumors of the presence of paying quantities of iron ore incited a great rush to the area. Much of the economic development of the region during the nineteenth century relied upon mining, lumbering, or related activities.

Mining operations centered on three concentrations of iron ore, called "ranges," extending from east to west across northeastern Minnesota: the Vermilion, the Mesabi, and the Cuyuna. In 1884, the first load of ore was shipped from the Vermilion Range, followed in 1892 by a shipment from Mountain Iron on the more expansive Mesabi Range. Extending in a northeast-southwest direction for approximately 100 miles, the Mesabi Range was destined to become the nation's largest iron ore producer. Extraction of ore began on the Cuyuna Range in 1908, although the first shipment from the Kennedy Mine near Crosby was not until 1911.

The first ore discovered in what became known as the Virginia District was on the Missabe Mountain Mine in March 1892, from which 123,015 tons of ore were shipped in 1893. One year later, the output was over 500,000 tons and the Missabe Mountain Mine, along with the Mountain Iron Mine, was yielding a greater

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amount of ore than the other twelve mines on the Mesabi Range.² An 1895 report about Minnesota's iron ore commented that the Virginia District "is by far the largest group on the range..." with valuable deposits located north, east, and south of the city.³ At least 21 other mines were opened around Virginia, most by the turn of the century.⁴

Unlike other Range towns, Virginia's economy was not entirely dependent upon mining. The lumber industry also provided employment for many workers. John Owens and Robert McGruer operated a small portable sawmill in Virginia when the town was initially founded in 1892.⁵ Later that same year, it was announced that the Finlayson Company of St. Paul had purchased 50 million board feet of timber in the Virginia area and planned to build a sawmill in town that would employ 100 men. W.T. Bailey hired 35 men after he built his mill in 1895. Although another fire in 1900 leveled the city, Virginia's lumber industry grew rapidly at the turn of the century in order to meet the demands from iron ore mining. In 1902, Plummer and Ash built an "immense sawmill" that later became part of the Virginia Lumber Company.⁶ Two years later the company constructed a planing mill that employed 100 men; in 1907, they added a lath mill and had on their payroll about 1,500 employees.⁷

These mills became part of the Virginia and Rainy Lake Lumber Company, which was established in 1908 by Frederick Weyerhaeuser, Edward Hines, and other investors. Within a year of being founded, the plant, estimated to be worth \$10 million, produced at least 300 million board feet of lumber per year. During peak production, 3,000 men worked all year in the woods to supply the mill with logs. The mill covered one square mile and contained seven band saws, three resaws, and six edgers, as well as an extensive railroad network (originally the Duluth, Virginia and Rainy Lake Railroad, later the Duluth, Winnipeg and Pacific Railroad) that reached from Duluth to the Canadian border. A wide assortment of buildings filled numerous functions, including the Manager's Residence (1910, NRHP) and the Office (ca.1907, NRHP). The company closed its operation in 1929.

Virginia was established as a direct result of both the mining and lumber industries. Located in the central Mesabi Iron Range, the community was founded in 1892 by a group of men who organized the Virginia Improvement Company to take advantage of the town's strategic location adjacent to the rapidly-developing mining district. In November 1892, Virginia was officially recognized as a village, and one month later a branch of the Duluth, Missabe and Northern Railroad was linked to the community. Construction of the railroad encouraged rapid growth to the point that "every line of retail business was soon represented," according to one historian. Even though a small sawmill had been built, demand for lumber exceeded supply, resulting in shipments from outside the village.⁹ By 1893, Virginia reportedly had nearly 5,000 residents, and over

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fifteen mines in the area producing ore.¹⁰ However, a disastrous fire on 18 June 1893 completely destroyed the village. Despite a loss in population after the fire, Virginia rebuilt immediately, became incorporated in 1895, and continued to be unsurpassed among Mesabi Range communities in the 1890s. One turn-of-the-century author described the city's progress in the following words: "Situated on a couple of small lakes at the foot of this ridge, where stood nothing but a dense and untracked forest in 1892, Virginia is the metropolis of the range."¹¹ In 1895, it had a population of 3,647 people compared to 1,085 for Hibbing and 746 for Eveleth; by the turn of the century, the number had dropped to just below 3,000 (due in part to a second devastating fire, this one in 1900), but it still remained the largest city in the region.¹²

With the mining and lumber industries thriving in Virginia during the late 1800s, the city gradually developed a reputation as the municipal leader in northern St. Louis County. In his 1921 description of Virginia, historian Walter Van Brunt remarked:

By reason of its geographical position fundamentally, but for other reasons also, the city of Virginia rightly is termed the "Queen City of the Mesabi Iron Range." She has since the 'nineties been the centre, the metropolis, of the range, one might say of the ranges, for she is recognized as the business metropolis of the Vermilion as well as the Mesabi range. Hibbing is becoming increasingly conspicuous, and is notably aggressive, but the general impression a stranger in Virginia gets of things municipal, social and civic is that Virginia is, and long has been, the established leader among the communities of the range territory.¹³

As the city's economy grew stronger, its population increased to 10,473 residents by 1910.¹⁴ Virginia's infrastructure expanded as well, and by 1910 four railroads and a streetcar system served the city's transportation needs, and an array of buildings were under construction including the Federal Building, Canadian Northern Railroad Depot, a public library, two public schools, and an opera house.¹⁵

The status gained as the "Queen City" was an important factor that contributed to the selection of Virginia in 1910 as the site for a judicial district. Another major reason was because of the difficulties encountered in traveling to the county seat at Duluth for court proceedings. One historian credits Lafayette Bliss, superintendent of Virginia's public schools and an outspoken advocate for improved court facilities on the range,¹⁶ with securing the courthouse because:

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He noted that all juvenile offenders had to be tried in the juvenile court at Duluth, and the contact that necessarily came between the erring juveniles and older, more hardened, offenders was, he thought, not conducive to improvement of normal conduct of the juveniles. He called a public¹⁷ meeting....and eventually brought action by the state legislature...

As early as 1904, a small frame building on the edge of Virginia's business district functioned as a courthouse.¹⁸ In the summer of 1909, the county paid \$800 per year to lease part of the second floor of the Virginia city hall for its district court.¹⁹ That fall the county auditor and commissioners visited Virginia to "investigate the necessity for a Court House for the Range Court," after which they passed a resolution to build a district courthouse "when a suitable site²⁰ can be found and whenever the funds necessary therefore are available." At its 3 December 1909 meeting, the county board approved the preliminary plans prepared by architects Bray and Nystrom for a district court building, and instructed the firm to provide complete drawings and specifications for a structure to cost not more than \$75,000.²¹

The following January the county acquired Block 43 by condemnation from the city, which had planned to use the land for a public park.²² In early February 1910, one county commissioner commented that Virginia "will unquestionably have a building the coming autumn of which it may feel proud,"²³ but a month later a group of local residents expressed to the county board serious reservations that the proposed building was not large enough. Their concerns focused on what they considered to be an insufficient number of jail cells (eight) and a lack of office space. After consulting with the architects, the design was modified by raising the building two feet and creating a ten-foot-high basement so the jail could be²⁴ moved there to vacate space on the upper floors for administrative offices. Although some people in Virginia continued to think that the courthouse was too small, it was designed so that a compatible addition could be built on the east, or rear, wall.²⁵ In early spring the commissioners selected the Bailey-Marsh Company of Duluth to construct the building.²⁶

The architects that designed the courthouse were William T. Bray (1868-1959) and Carl E. Nystrom (ca.1867-1944). Bray moved from New York to Duluth in 1891 where he was employed from 1892 to 1895 as a draftsman-designer for Traphagen and Fitzpatrick. From 1896 until 1905 he worked in partnership with at least three other architects. For 15 years from 1906 until about 1915 Bray practiced with Nystrom, designing at least two dozen houses and public schools in Duluth and several Range towns including Biwabik, Eveleth, Gilbert, Kewatin, Mountain Iron, and Virginia. Properties designed by Bray and listed in the National Register include Sacred Heart Cathedral and Cathedral School in Duluth (1896, 1904),

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Eveleth Manual Training School (1914), and the Hibbing High School (1919-24). Carl Nystrom was born in Sweden and came to America in 1889, living for some time in Ironwood, Michigan and Ashland, Wisconsin before arriving in Duluth in 1892. Prior to becoming a partner with Bray he worked from 1902 to 1905 with an architect named Young.

Since the turn of the century there have been many unsuccessful attempts to divide St. Louis County and create a new county seat on the Range. In lieu of such a division and due in part to the enormous size of the county, two additional judicial districts were created at Hibbing and Virginia to alleviate many of the problems faced by county court administrators and area residents. Constructed for people living on the west end of Mesabi Range, the Hibbing facility was constructed in 1916 but demolished about five years later when the town was moved by the Oliver Iron Mining Company. It was not replaced again until 1954. Virginia's courthouse represents the only known historic example in the state of a judicial property built outside of the county seat specifically for a geographic region. The courthouse continues to fulfill this need today.

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ENDNOTES

1. David A. Walker, Iron Frontier: The Discovery and Early Development of Minnesota's Three Ranges (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1979), 57, 105, 252, 254.
2. Walter Van Brunt, Duluth and St. Louis County Minnesota, vol. 2 (Chicago and New York: The American Historical Society, 1921), 578.
3. Horace V. Winchell, The Iron Ranges of Minnesota (Minneapolis: Harrison & Smith, 1895), 6-7.
4. Van Brunt, St. Louis County, 575-86.
5. Van Brunt, St. Louis County, 588.
6. Van Brunt, St. Louis County, 594.
7. Ibid.
8. Agnes M. Larson, History of the White Pine Industry in Minnesota (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1949), 400.
9. Van Brunt, St. Louis County, 588.
10. Daily Virginian, 30 August 1907.
11. Winchell, Iron Ranges of Minnesota , 7.
12. Fourth Decennial Census of the State of Minnesota (St. Paul: Pioneer Press Co., 1895), 50; United States, Bureau of the Census, Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1920), 26.
13. Van Brunt, Duluth and St. Louis County, 574.
14. Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920, 26.
15. Virginia Enterprise, 7 October 1910.
16. Bliss authored a lengthy article for the newspaper in which he promoted the need for a juvenile court, a probation officer, and a detention home on the range. Virginia Enterprise, 25 November 1910.

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17. Van Brunt, St. Louis County, 601. Legislation created another judicial district in Hibbing for court cases on the western end of the Mesabi Range. A courthouse was built there in 1916 but demolished about five years later when the town was moved by the Oliver Iron Mining Company. The present courthouse was constructed in 1954.

18. The 1904 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map shows a one-story, wood frame "Courthouse" on Lot 17, Block 26 of the Original Townsite, originally South Wyoming Avenue and presently South Central Avenue. The same building also appears on the 1908 Sanborn.

19. St. Louis County Board of Commissioners Minutes, 8 July 1909, 472; Virginia Enterprise, 28 January 1910.

20. St. Louis County Board of Commissioners Minutes, 7 September 1909, 56-57; 7 October 1909, 68.

21. St. Louis County Board of Commissioners Minutes, 3 December 1909, 110.

22. The city stipulated that they receive no less than \$25,000 for the land. Virginia Enterprise, 7 January 1910.

23. Virginia Enterprise, 11 February 1910.

24. Virginia Enterprise, 11 March 1910; St. Louis County Board of Commissioners Minutes, 8 March 1910, 207.

25. The local newspaper criticized the courthouse as "...not an extremely large building..." and "...too small for the use to which it was needed from the outset." Virginia Enterprise, 18 September 1910; Virginia Enterprise, 12 May 1911; see also Virginia Enterprise, 7 October 1910. An addition was eventually built in 1921.

26. Bailey-Marsh had the low bid of \$58,715. Other bids were received from Graham & Young, \$67,481; Bowe-Burke Co., \$74,361; McLeod & Smith, \$81,355; and John Conlin, \$82,729. Virginia Enterprise, 6 May 1910.

27. William T. Bray and Carl E. Nystrom files, Northwest Architectural Archives, St. Paul, MN.

9. Major Bibliographical References

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 # _____

See continuation sheet

Primary location of additional data:

- State historic preservation office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Specify repository: _____

10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of property Less than one acre

UTM References

A

1	5	5	3	4	8	0	0	5	2	6	2	9	4	0
Zone				Easting				Northing						

B

Zone				Easting				Northing						

C

Zone				Easting				Northing						

D

Zone				Easting				Northing						

See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

The nominated property occupies city lots 4-29 of block 43 of the original townsite.

See continuation sheet

Boundary Justification

The boundary includes the entire city lots that have historically been associated with the property.

See continuation sheet

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Michael Koop/Preservation Consultant
organization NA date 23 September 1991
street & number 615 Jackson St. NE telephone 612-623-8356
city or town Minneapolis state MN zip code 55413

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Landis, Paul H. Three Iron Mining Towns: A Study in Cultural Change. Ann Arbor: Edwards Brothers, Inc., 1938.

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Minnesota State Bar Association. The First 100 Years...The Minnesota State Bar Association. St. Paul: North Central Publishing Co., 1983.

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William T. Bray and Carl E. Nystrom files, Northwest Architectural Archives, St. Paul, MN.