

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900A). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name United States Post Office and Court House

other names/site number _____

2. Location

street & number 317 First Street N/A not for publication

city or town Wausau N/A vicinity

state Wisconsin code WI county Marathon code 073 zip code 54403

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, 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. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally statewide locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title

3/14/12
Date

State Historic Preservation Officer - Wisconsin

State or Federal agency and bureau _____

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria.
(See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of commenting official/Title _____

Date _____

State or Federal agency and bureau _____

United States Post Office and Court House

Marathon

Wisconsin

Name of Property

County and State

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:
[] entered in the National Register.
[] See continuation sheet.
[] determined eligible for the National Register.
[] See continuation sheet.
[] determined not eligible for the National Register.
[] See continuation sheet.
[] removed from the National Register.
[] other, (explain:)

Edson H. Beall

5-2-12

[Signature]

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

5. Classification

Table with 3 columns: Ownership of Property, Category of Property, and Number of Resources within Property. Includes checkboxes for private/public ownership and building/structure/site/object categories.

Name of related multiple property listing
(Enter N/A if property not part of a multiple property listing)
N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register
0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
GOVERNMENT: courthouse
GOVERNMENT: post office

Current Functions
VACANT / NOT IN USE

7. Description

Architectural Classification
MODERN MOVEMENT: Art Deco

Materials
foundation concrete
walls brick
roof rubber
other stone

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets)

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for the National Register listing)

- A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply)

Property is:

- A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B removed from its original location.
- C a birthplace or grave.
- D a cemetery.
- E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F a commemorative property.
- G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

Politics / Government

Architecture

Period of Significance

1938-1969

Significant Dates

1938

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Oppenhamer & Obel (architects)

Midwest Contracting Company (builder)

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets)

United States Post Office and Court House
Name of Property

Marathon
County and State

Wisconsin

9. Major Bibliographic References

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets)

Previous Documentation on file (National Park Service):

- 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

Name of repository:

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property less than one acre

UTM References (Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1	<u>16</u>	<u>292530</u>	<u>4981620</u>
	Zone	Easting	Northing
2	<u></u>	<u></u>	<u></u>
	Zone	Easting	Northing

3	<u></u>	<u></u>	<u></u>
	Zone	Easting	Northing
4	<u></u>	<u></u>	<u></u>
	Zone	Easting	Northing

See Continuation Sheet

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet)

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Clayton B. Fraser, Principal

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date 20 November 2011

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Section 7 Page 1

United States Post Office and Court House
Wausau, Marathon County, Wisconsin

Description

The Wausau United State Post Office and Court House is situated within the urban setting of the northern Wisconsin city of Wausau. Sitting in a predominantly commercial area in the heart of the central business district, the building occupies half of a city block across the street from the Marathon County Public Library. The property fronts west toward First Street, with Jefferson Street and Washington Street flanking its north and south sides, respectively, and a parking lot at the rear. Typical for a government building of the time, the Wausau Federal Building is set back slightly from the sidewalks along its front and sides, giving the building a more imposing countenance and distinguishing it from its commercial neighbors. Between the sidewalks and the building is a small grassed lawn. Evergreen and deciduous shrubs are planted around the foundation at the front and two sides, and decorative iron railings line the wells for the basement-level windows on the two sides. The rear of the building is abutted by a raised concrete loading dock. ADA access to the first floor is via a concrete ramp that ascends to this dock. The rear of the property is taken up entirely by a large asphalt-surfaced parking lot, and the narrow south side of the building, just beyond the foundation planting, is similarly paved for parking. The main level of the Federal Building is raised several feet above street level, and the building is accessed by a broad granite stair on the front. This stairway is flanked on both sides by massive granite bulkheads, upon which are mounted decorative cast iron lampposts. The requisite flagpole stands in the lawn at the northwest corner of the property.

The building is massed as a great two-story masonry block, 138 feet wide and 65 feet deep, on a raised concrete foundation, with a partial third floor at the rear. The First Street façade features a recessed five-bay central section, 61 feet wide, which is flanked on both sides by brick bays that project forward by six feet. This enframed block configuration—a central pilastrade anchored on both sides by symmetrical corner elements—is the strongest character-defining element of the building's exterior. The scale and stripped down classicism of the building define it visually as a governmental building of the era. The façade, as well as the sides and rear, are all essentially symmetrical, and all display the classical vertical hierarchy of base, body and cap, delineated by limestone belt courses that extend continuously around the walls. The building's defining elements are essentially intact today.

The roofs over the main section and loading dock are flat, covered with composition roofing and lined with brick parapets and limestone copings on all sides. Classed as a fireproof structure, the building is supported by a reinforced concrete foundation and structural steel frame, with reinforced concrete floor and roof slabs. The exterior walls are sheathed by masonry comprised of buff-colored face bricks laid in common bond. The windows feature six-over-six or eight-over-eight wood double-hung sash; the front door (a replacement) features a double-leaf aluminum frame.

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The building's primary façade faces west toward First Street. Defined clearly as the building's front by the landscaping, the broad ascending staircase, and the positioning at the sidewalk, it features a five-bay central section (discussed above), which is framed by wide brick pilasters framing windows and spandrel panels. The windows (6/6 double-hungs) on both levels of the central section are flanked by fixed-sash sidelights and on the first-floor level are stacked two high, with the upper windows functioning as nine-light fixed-sash transoms. Spandrel panels made of green Virginia granite separate the two levels; as the building's only ornamentation, these feature incised panels between the first and second floor windows and, in the central spandrel over the front entrance, a carved bas relief of a bald eagle. The pilasters are capped with a limestone belt course, above which is a plain brick parapet with a simple limestone coping. They are footed by a stone sill course that forms the top of the raised foundation. The building's main entrance occupies the center bay. It features a two-leaf doorway, with a six-panel metal-framed transom over, all of which are framed by square columns with scalloped shafts and plain capitals and plinths. The doors are glass set in aluminum storefront frames. These replaced the original metal doors, which were identical with the existing transom panels. Originally, the building name, UNITED STATES POST OFFICE AND COURT HOUSE, rendered in bronze letters, was affixed to the parapet. This lettering was removed after the post office vacated the building.

On either side of the center section is an eighteen-foot-wide, projecting brick bay with a single bank of windows configured like those in the center bays. These are inset somewhat from the wall plane behind a two-level brick corbel. Centered on the parapet is a round stone or concrete tablet; it lacks any decorative carving. Outside of each projecting bay is a recessed twenty-foot-wide end bay that has a single bank of windows like those in the projecting bay. Primary access to the building is given at this façade by means of a broad two-tiered stairway, comprised of granite slabs with smooth traffic surfaces and quarry-tooled nosings. The lower six-step tier, which begins at the edge of the sidewalk, is framed on both sides by massive granite bulkheads, atop which are the cast iron lampposts. It ascends to a broad granite platform, from which the upper six-step stairway ascends to the front door. Narrower than the lower tier, this upper stairway is also framed by stone bulkheads. A welded steel pipe handrail has been added to the center of the stairway.

The secondary façades on the north and south sides resemble the front in their symmetry, proportions and use of materials. Each has a four-bay central section flanked by a one-bay section that recesses slightly from the center section. The belt courses, parapets, windows and spandrels are similar to those on the façade, with the only appreciable differences being the presence of a bank of garden-level windows at the foot of the north wall and the lack of a first floor window in the right central bay on the south elevation. The lower level windows are situated within concrete window wells (a wide center well for four windows, flanked on both sides by smaller single-window wells). The window wells are

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United States Post Office and Court House
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lined with decorative wrought iron railings. The brick panel on the south elevation is original; the location corresponds to the placement of the vault on the interior.

The rear of the building, which faces east, is a two-story brick wall, 138 feet wide by 35 feet tall, with a 72-foot-wide third story in the center and a 30-foot by 22-foot two-story brick structure that projects from it. Like the front and sides, it is essentially symmetrical, though in this case the symmetry is broken by an off-center brick chimney, which is attached to the north side of the loading dock projection. The center projection is flanked on either side by two window bays. With typical double-hung sash and granite spandrels, these window bays differ from those on the front and sides in that they feature paired windows. A single smaller second floor is located between the two south window bays. (This window lights the private toilet off of the judge's chambers.) The center projection has an open loading dock on the raised first floor and an enclosed second floor lined with four 6/6 double-hung windows. (A fifth window has been bricked in, with a louvered ventilator panel placed partially in the opening, creating an asymmetry among the window openings here.) Above the projection are five stacked windows for the second-floor courtroom. The third-story extension of the wall, which comprises the center section of the building, contains two pairs of 6/6 double-hung windows located at either end of the extension; these serve the jury rooms at either side of the courtroom. All of these latter window openings feature wood frames and sash, limestone slip sills and steel lintels with soldier brick heads.

Typical of almost all public buildings of the time, the Wausau Federal Building has a limestone cornerstone placed on the foundation wall in its southwest corner. Inscribed on the stone is:

Henry Morgenthau Jr	Secretary of the Treasury
James A Farley	Postmaster General
Louis A Simon	Supervising Architect
Neal A Melick	Supervising Engineer
Oppenhamer & Obel	Architects
E Brielmaier & Sons Co.	Consulting Architects

1937

The interior spaces of the Federal Building have been altered somewhat, but the public spaces retain their essential character. The first floor is organized around a central public lobby, which extends the width of the building's center section. The lobby is entered from the main entrance on the building's primary façade, through a free-standing vestibule. This small room features a terrazzo floor, marble wainscot, oak trim, and windows and painted plaster walls framed by paired columns with rosettes applied to the continuous head. The lobby is a long, relatively narrow and tall space, which features highly veined red marble wainscots, door surrounds and radiator jackets, oak trim, terrazzo floor with contrasting border and a shallowly coffered plaster ceiling. The walls feature symmetrically spaced

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marble pilasters with glazed terra cotta capitals featuring low-relief renderings of Midwestern scenes—an airplane, a train and a log cabin. The lobby's west wall is lined with windows set in stained-wood frames; its east wall once housed customer counters and post office boxes for the post office, but these have since been replaced with a frame wall sheathed with vinyl wallpaper and lined with decorative metal grilles high on this wall.

The northern end of the lobby contains a stair hall, which is separated from the main lobby by a full-height archway. On the west end of this hall is an open-stringer, half-turn staircase that ascends to the second floor, with a secondary staircase to the basement below. This staircase features a steel superstructure, with concrete treads and steel risers, decorative steel balustrade and oak newel caps and handrails. It is flanked by oak-framed wall cabinets that contain a directory and a bulletin board. Opposite the staircase, on the east wall of the stair hall is a large mural, painted by noted Wisconsin artist Gerrit Van Sinclair in 1938. Titled "Lumbering Rural Mail," it features a tableau of early Wausau lumbering and milling rendered using oil in Regionalist style.¹ On either end of the lobby and in the spaces once occupied by the post office work room are warrens of small offices. These typically feature carpeted or tiled floors, painted plaster walls, suspended acoustic tile ceilings and oak windows, doors and trim. The most noteworthy original feature found here is a walk-in postal safe, manufactured in 1937 by the Herring-Hall-Marvin Safe Company of Hamilton, Ohio.

The second floor is dominated by the federal courtroom. Two stories tall, this space occupies the east half of the floor plan, with five two-story windows along its east wall. With virtually all of its original oak Art Deco furniture intact, including the judge's bench, recorder's desk, counselors' tables, witness stand, jury box and visitors' benches, the courtroom retains a remarkably high degree of physical integrity. It is divided at the center by a wood spectator rail, with the front part of the room carpeted and the part behind the spectator rail floored with painted plywood sheets. The walls are sheathed with textured plaster and are lined with paneled oak wainscots; the original ceiling features a large shallow center coffer framed with a two-tiered step around the room's perimeter and is covered with acoustic tiles glued directly to the substrate. Electric fans are mounted to the room's walls.

Offices, including judge's chambers, U.S. marshal's office and attorney's conference rooms, comprise the remainder of the second floor spaces. These are floored variously with carpet, maple tongue-in-groove floorboards and vinyl-asbestos tiles and are enclosed with plaster ceilings and textured plaster walls with oak baseboards and chair rails. Doors are paneled oak, some containing obscure-glass panels; the windows and doors are trimmed with oak casings and jambs and feature copper-patina hinges, knobs, latches and escutcheons. The central hallway features terrazzo floors and plaster walls and ceiling. The marshal's office still contains a curved oak reception counter and an iron-barred

¹ The mural is owned by the General Services Administration (GSA).

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detention cell for prisoners. Some of the chambers have original lavatories attached to the walls. The bathrooms have original plaster walls and ceilings with glazed tile wainscots, terrazzo floors, ceramic lavatories and water closets, and marble partitions with nickel-plate bars and brackets. An abbreviated third story contains a jury room on either end of the courtroom. Identical in size and layout, these feature maple tongue-in-groove floors, painted plaster walls with oak baseboards and chair rails, and acoustical tile ceilings glued directly to the substrate.

The building's basement comprises about two-thirds of its footprint, with habitable spaces occupying the north and central sections and an unexcavated crawl space under the south section. The west (front) part of the basement is divided into a series of offices and storage spaces, aligned along a single el-shaped corridor. Like the offices on the first floor, these are typically finished with painted plaster walls, acoustic tile ceilings and tile floors, with paneled wood doors, double-hung windows, and stained wood chair rails and window and door frames. A large boiler room is situated below the rear loading dock; a fuel room adjoins this on the north. The basement is raised, and the offices along the exterior walls feature double-hung windows in concrete window wells.

Much of the building's interior is intact, as indicated by a description made by the *Wausau Daily Record-Herald* at the time of its opening in April 1938:

Many persons visited the new structure when it was open to public inspection. Briefly what they saw as they approached the postoffice from the front was a graceful flight of steps leading to the door, which is surmounted by a spread-winged eagle carved in bas relief out of green stone. The door opens into a small ante-room or storm-shed, which opens, in turn, into the main lobby. Here are the postal windows, with the letter drops to the left, the stamp purchasing and parcel post mailing windows straight ahead and the registry department to the right.

The lobby is the most striking part of the building, finished in different types of marble and brilliantly illuminated by a long line of chandeliers. It is complete with bulletin boards and writing desks and has several hundred postoffice boxes at the right center section. Leaving the lobby at the north end, the visitor turns right and passes the office of Postmaster O.L. Ringle. His office enters into the huge workroom of the postoffice which occupies the eastern two-thirds of the first floor. It is equipped with a vault, a COD cage (all such parcels must be kept under lock) and all other features necessary to handle the postal rush. The workroom is bordered on the east by the loading platform.

Retracing one's steps to the lobby, one mounts stairs at the north end in order to reach the offices and federal court on the second floor. To the right at the top down a long corridor

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are offices for the U.S. probation officer and two U.S. district court clerks. The corridor terminates in the U.S. marshal's office, which is furnished with a small cell to hold dangerous prisoners while they await their appearance in court. The court room and chambers for Judge Stone are at the left of the corridor, and are among the more impressive features of the building. The judge has a suite of four rooms with entrances both into the corridor and into the court room. The only air condition room in the structure, the court room is roofed with acoustical tile to deaden echoes.²

Although largely intact, the Wausau Federal Building has undergone several alterations, many of which have been discussed above. These have occurred largely since the post office moved from the building in 1969 and have involved more changes to the interior than to the exterior. Among the alterations are: removal of the bronze letters from the façade parapet; replacement of front and rear doorways with aluminum frames and doors; installation of a handicapped-access ramp on building's east side; removal of post office boxes and customer counters from main postal lobby and replacement with full-height wall; replacement of original chandeliers in postal lobby with surface-mounted light fixtures; removal of writing desks and retail sales fixtures from postal lobby; reconfiguration of postal work rooms into offices, with changes to floor, wall and ceiling materials; and replacement of some of the finish materials in basement and upper-level office spaces. Despite these changes, the structure maintains a high degree of integrity of design, workmanship, location, setting, materials, feeling and association. As a result, the Wausau Post Office and Court House is an important landmark for the city, a visual anchor for the central business district.

² "Wausau Postoffice Moves into Its New Building Today." *Wausau Daily Record-Herald*, 2 April 1938.

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United States Post Office and Court House
Wausau, Marathon County, Wisconsin

Summary

Built in 1937-1938, the United States Post Office and Court House in Wausau is a locally prominent landmark that derives its significance from two principal areas: government and architecture. The period of significance for the Wausau United States Post Office and Court House extends from 1938, the year that the building was completed, until 1969, the year that it ceased operating as the city's post office. The property is eligible for listing in the National Register at the local level under Criterion A, as the symbol and location of the federal government in the city. Beset by a series of legislative and bureaucratic delays, the Post Office took eleven years from the time it was proposed until it was completed. Once opened to the public, the building immediately became a central part of the cultural fabric of downtown Wausau. It served as the center for the city's postal operations, as one of a handful of federal circuit courts in northern Wisconsin, and as the nexus for federal agencies such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Labor Department and the Internal Revenue Service. The Post Office thus functioned for thirty years as the most prominent manifestation of the federal government in Wausau. It was a source of pride for the city and a cornerstone in the city's center.

The Wausau Post Office is also eligible under Criterion C for its embodiment of the distinctive characteristics of a period and style of construction. The structure was designed for the federal Supervising Architect's Office by Wausau architects Oppenhamer & Obel, the city's most prominent architectural firm in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s. For this building, the architects employed a pared-back rendition of the Art Deco style, an architectural idiom that distinguished many public buildings of the period. The Wausau Post Office is characterized by its relatively simple form, with flat surfaces arranged in a linear, determinedly modernistic pattern. Like the "starved classical" buildings of the period, it makes minimal use of applied ornamentation, limiting exterior architectural decoration to the carved granite spandrels over the entrance on the façade. The interior of the building displays many of its original forms and surfaces. The most noteworthy spaces are the postal lobby on the first floor and the courtroom on the second, both of which feature Art Deco craftsmanship. The most notable feature of the lobby is the mural in one of its stairwells, painted by Wisconsin artist Gerrit Van Sinclair; it is an example of the type of Regionalist work featured in post offices constructed during this period. Alterations to the building have been relatively minor; as a result, it stands as a well-executed and well-preserved example of its style. As a Depression-era public building rendered in a modernistic style, the Federal Building is singular on the Wausau landscape. As such it deserves to be listed in the National Register.

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United States Post Office and Court House
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Elaboration

Wausau's early postal history is typical enough. The settlement was situated strategically within a heavily forested region along the Wisconsin River, on land that had been ceded by the Chippewa Indians to the U.S. in 1836. Wausau's location on a steep decline of the river known as Big Bull Falls suited it well for water-powered sawmills, and lumbering soon became its principle industry. During the 1840s a village developed among the sawmills here, sporting the usual array of businesses, boarding houses, churches and saloons. The earliest postal delivery was informal at best, with packets of letters being carried to and from the village by travelers on horseback, stagecoaches, wagons, dog sleds, even canoes. In 1842 Congress established the first postal route in the area, with semi-regular delivery from Port Winnebago (now Portage) to Grand Rapids (now Wisconsin Rapids), and up to Plover Portage below Stevens Point. From there, it was carried to Wausau "by courtesy" of stagecoaches and people who happened to be headed north. Sometime later a second route was added between Ontonagon, Michigan, and Wausau, which followed an old Indian trail past Grandfather Falls, Rhinelander and Lake Vieux Desert. Though scheduled for three times a week, mail delivery was intermittent—dependent on weather and availability of transportation—and sometimes lagged by weeks. "The Ontonagon mail service was always carried on under great difficulties," states historian Louis Marchetti. "As may be imagined, the trip could not always be made on time, often was delayed by storms, and mail was detained; towards spring when the snow melted, the trail was not passable at all, and all mail was stopped." Marchetti described one incident that took place in May 1857 and has since become part of Wausau lore:

Postmaster Thomas Single contracted with Levy Flemming to carry the accumulated mail from Wausau to Ontonagon for \$300. There were about fifteen sacks of mail, and Mr. Flemming started out with the help of another man by bark canoe up north. They made the journey together as far as Grandmother Falls, when in portaging Mr. Flemming lost his assistant to drowning and was forced to proceed alone. He started alone on his journey by water until he reached Eagle, then carried the mail over the divide afoot, going with one sack and coming back for another, until he had one-half of it again on the bank of the river; then with that half of the mail he went to Ontonagon; came back for the rest to Eagle and started again to Ontonagon. He deposited the last sack of mail on June 13th, then started for home. A trip like that, under the conditions as they were at the time, would seem like an impossibility today.¹

¹Louis Marchetti, *History of Marathon County, Wisconsin, and Representative Citizens* (Chicago: Richmond-Arnold Publishing Company, 1913), 123-124.

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United States Post Office and Court House
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The road from Ontonagon was later widened to accommodate wagon traffic and became known as the pony express. It was abandoned as a post road when the railroad later entered town.

In 1847 the Post Office Department initiated the use of postage stamps; in 1850 the Department began requiring prepayment of postage by the sender. That year Marathon County was created, and Wausau's first postmaster, Charles Shuter, took office as "keeper of the mails." The office carried with it the privilege of political patronage, and the location of the post office within a town was at the discretion of the postmaster. The post office was typically located within the premises of the postmaster's existing business, which leased space to the Department at a profit. Little is known about the whereabouts of the post office under Shuter or his successors, Edson Doolittle and Thomas Single. Harvey Lawrence, who served as postmaster between 1857 and 1861, operated the post office in the eponymously named Lawrence Building. His successor Francis Hoffman operated the post office from his store at the southwest corner of Third and Washington Streets, then Eli Chase from his building on Scott Street, then Robert Parcher from his drug store on First Street.² Wausau's post office thus moved in this manner from place to place through the remainder of the century, occupying some fourteen locations within the downtown area by the turn of the 20th century. Nearly all the retail businesses in town were situated on Main, First and Second Streets, between Forest and McClellan Streets, and all the post offices but Parcher's fit within this envelope.

Wausau's experience typified government trends throughout the country in the 19th century. With individual Congressional approval required for each new building and Congress reluctant to approve more than three buildings at a time, few post offices were built outside of all but the largest cities, which prompted the Post Office Department to lease space for virtually all of its facilities. By the turn of the 20th century there were some 400 federal buildings administered by the Treasury Department. This began to change in 1902, with passage by Congress of the Omnibus Public Buildings Act. Authorizing some 150 new construction projects, this legislation marked the

²Wausau's postmasters, listed by date of appointment, from the village's first in 1850 to completion of the Federal Building in 1938:

Charles Shuter	4 April 1850	Theophilus Smith	29 June 1869
Edson Doolittle	26 May 1854	Robert H. Johnson	13 January 1876
Thomas Single	15 July 1854	Valentine Ringle	6 April 1886
Harvey H. Lawrence	14 May 1857	Andrew W. Young	11 April 1890
Francis A. Hoffman	15 April 1861	John Ringle	14 September 1893
Eli R. Chase	7 January 1862	Dr. A.W. Trevitt	14 September 1897
Justin P. West	27 April 1863	Thomas H. Ryan	25 February 1914
Eli R. Chase	8 May 1865	Louis H. Cook	7 January 1924
Robert E. Parcher	10 April 1868	O.L. Ringle	1 April 1937

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United States Post Office and Court House
Wausau, Marathon County, Wisconsin

first wholesale approval of government construction. It effectively consolidated the individual efforts of legislators and produced a considerable savings in time and effort by the government. It also allowed Congressmen to fund government construction within their districts more discretely than individual authorization would allow. This latter aspect brought out the worst from the politicians, providing an opportunity for abuse in the distribution of government largesse. With political gamesmanship, rather than operational need, often influencing the size, location and ostentation of federal projects, Congress deservedly suffered charges of “pork barrel politics” from the press.

One of the 150 projects approved by the initial Omnibus Act in 1902 was a post office for Wausau. Located at the northeast corner of Fourth and Scott Streets downtown, it was delineated by the Treasury Department’s Supervising Architect as a single-story masonry block over a raised foundation, with a flat, parapeted roof and symmetrical five-bay façade. The building’s Beaux Arts detailing—segmental-arched openings on the stone-faced façade, corbeled stone quoins and voussoirs, and an elegant stone cartouche centered on the front parapet—reflected the Supervising Architect’s Office’s penchant for neoclassical architecture. Construction began in September 1904 and concluded late in October 1905. The new building was opened ceremoniously to the public on November 2, as reported by the *Central Wisconsin*:

On Wednesday night the transfer of the postoffice was made from the old quarters to the new Federal building and Postmaster Trevitt and force are now installed in the handsome new quarters. The building was thrown open for the inspection of the public and there was a vast throng of people who took advantage of this opportunity to visit the new building and admire the interior. As an extra attraction the new electric cancellation machine was kept running to show the public how the stamps are cancelled and the dates stamped upon the envelopes. Postmaster Trevitt welcomed all visitors and did the honors, dispensing cigars, apples and sweet cider and made the visitors feel at home and at liberty to inspect the building at their will. The fixtures are all fine and the furniture is in keeping with the balance of the interior arrangements, the whole being very neat and Wausau now has one of the finest postoffices in the country.³

³“Postoffice Moved.” *The Central Wisconsin*, 4 November 1905.

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The structure was referred to in city directories as the Federal Building, but it was in essence a medium-sized post office with small offices for several other agencies. The building soon proved inadequate for the government's increasing needs, and in 1907 a second floor was added, increasing its square footage substantially. The addition seemed sufficient for the city's needs. "Local residents at that time believed they possessed a postoffice that would be capable of handling all business transactions of the department for generations," the *Wausau Record-Herald* later reported. "For many years it was the scene of bustling activity but as Wausau grew and prospered, an ever increasing demand for a new building was evident."⁴ By 1926 the post office showed annual receipts of \$170,000, qualifying it as a Class B Facility under the Department's McAdoo classification system. The Federal Building housed, in addition to the post office facilities, offices for the U.S. Army Reserve, the U.S. Court Commissioner, the Internal Revenue Service and the Weather Bureau.

That year Congress passed the Public Buildings Act, directing the Secretary of the Treasury and the Postmaster General to undertake a national survey intended to ascertain the need for new and/or expanded postal facilities. The first such omnibus bill enacted by Congress since World War I, it allocated millions of dollars toward construction of post offices and federal buildings around the country. The 1926 legislation contrasted with previous omnibus acts, which had authorized appropriations for specific projects. It also represented a major shift in federal building policy in terms of sheer numbers; since the war, the government had undertaken only a few building projects each year—ten in 1920, three each in 1921 and 1922, nine in 1923, and thirteen in 1924. The 1926 legislation increased these numbers considerably. Finally, the 1926 act changed the method of choosing construction projects. This legislation, unlike earlier omnibus acts, sought to avoid the appearance of political favoritism by steering the Treasury Department toward a policy of more objective fiscal analysis. Issued early the next year, the survey report identified over 2,300 cities and towns with postal receipts over \$10,000 that lacked federal buildings. From these, the government distilled a list of two hundred municipalities under consideration for new federal buildings, with the proviso that at least two new buildings be built in each state. Ten of these—

⁴"Mail Came to Wausau by Boat, Pony Express, Dog Team and Coach." *Wausau Daily Record-Herald, Centennial Edition*, 13 March 1939.

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including new buildings at Racine, Kenosha and Oshkosh and additions to existing buildings at Milwaukee, Appleton and La Crosse—were to be located in Wisconsin.⁵

Wausau again made the list, with \$270,000 earmarked to acquire land and build a new federal building.⁶ The news that Wausau had been included on the list apparently came as a surprise to the Wausau postmaster and city officials. “Nothing was heard here of the action to be taken by the department but local federal employees are of the opinion that the inclusion of this item in the program means that Wausau is to have a new federal building.”⁷

Whatever enthusiasm that Wausau residents had for the proposed new building faded in succeeding years, as the government shelved the project after the onset of the Great Depression. In 1930 Congress increased funding for public building by expanding the 1926 act, marking a formative attempt under the Hoover Administration to ameliorate unemployment through public works projects.⁸ A year later Congress passed the Federal Employment Stabilization Act in another, broader attempt to stimulate the national economy through federal construction. This legislation established the Federal Employment Stabilization Board, which was tasked with

⁵Ibid. The Wisconsin projects then under consideration were:

Milwaukee—Addition to federal building, \$2,370,000.

Kenosha—Destruction of federal building, purchase of ground adjoining and erection of new building on enlarged site, \$450,000.

Beloit—Addition to building including purchase of land, \$315,000.

Oshkosh—Sale of building and erection of new one elsewhere, \$467,000.

Wausau—Purchase of new land and erection of new building, \$270,000.

La Crosse—Addition to building, \$86,000.

Appleton—Addition to building including purchase of land, \$215,000.

Racine—New building on present site, \$400,000.

Marshfield—New building, \$100,000.

Waupun—New building, \$75,000.

⁶“Wausau May Get a New Federal Building Soon.” *Wausau Daily Record-Herald*, 17 January 1927:

It was stated at the post office today that the government has been making inquiries for a survey of the local federal building to determine its size, suitability, etc., and that the last request, recently made, was for information as to the possibility of purchasing land to enlarge the present site or for suggestions as to whether or not another site could be secured. This information showed the building here to be too small and that the purchase of additional land is not possible because of the proximity of the Elks club and the building of the Wausau Telephone company.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Among the Wisconsin buildings from the 1926 list undertaken at this time was the Marshfield Post Office (1930).

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advising the President about national economic trends. In response to the Board's recommendations, the President would propose emergency appropriations, which would, among other things, fund projects identified by the Public Buildings Act of 1926.

In February 1931 the *Record-Herald* in Wausau announced approval by the Senate of \$100 million in emergency funds under the act. "In this amount was \$280,000 for a postoffice at Wausau," the newspaper reported.⁹ Several Wisconsin buildings—the Beloit Post Office expansion (1931), new post offices at Waupun (1932), Kenosha (1933) and Menasha (1933)—were soon underway. But the post office at Wausau was delayed by a series of setbacks, beginning with the acquisition of property. Encouraged by the *Record-Herald*, Wausau landowners could offer their property for purchase by the government.¹⁰ Twenty such offers were placed; all were rejected by the local chamber of commerce:

A wave of local protest led the government to reject the original choice of land where the Business and Professional Women's club now stands. Finally, after more delays, the present location, on First street across from Library park, was purchased for \$84,000 from the owners of several parcels of land.¹¹

The property had cost so much to acquire and clear of existing structures that construction of the post office itself now exceeded the \$196,000 remaining in the budget and was rejected by the Supervising Architect's Office. The building was redesigned, paring back the architectural detailing to bring it under budget, but by that point in 1933 the funds earmarked for construction had been diverted to other purposes by the Treasury Department. The Wausau building thus languished in bureaucratic limbo for two more years until February 1935, when Wisconsin Senator F. Ryan Duffy and Representative Gerald J. Boileau jointly sponsored bills to establish a term of the federal circuit court in Wausau. The move was intended to bolster the building's importance by including Department of Justice facilities—a courtroom, judge and jury chambers, offices—with the Post Office and Treasury Department offices. In July President Roosevelt signed the bill into law. The incorporation of the large new spaces into the building necessitated yet another redesign, this time adding a second floor, which caused further delay in its construction schedule.

⁹"\$280,000 Is Allotted for Wausau Postoffice." *Wausau Daily Record-Herald*, 2 February 1931.

¹⁰"How Government Acquires Sites for Public Buildings." *Wausau Daily Record-Herald*, 12 March 1931.

¹¹"Mail Came to Wausau by Boat, Pony Express, Dog Team and Coach."

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Authorization of the Wausau post office placed it among the ranks of hundreds of federal buildings then in development by the government. The proliferation of federal building projects under the Roosevelt Administration had by 1935 increased the complexity and sheer number of federal construction projects dramatically. The Treasury Department's annual report that year listed building projects under the Public Works Administration and Emergency Relief Administration, as well as the original Public Buildings Program from the 1926 Act, under which the Wausau building fell. In an effort to relieve Depression-caused unemployment, the administration was then pushing to build post offices and federal buildings that had been identified under the 1926 act, as well as those in towns that had not been included in the act or its subsequent amendments. In 1935 the government built 185 post offices; 260 in 1936; 303 in 1937; and 259 in 1938.

The Public Buildings Act of 1926 had emphasized the necessity for standardization to foster design and construction efficiency, and the glut of work in the early 1930s had served to increase the urgency of this need. In 1935, the Treasury Department established an advisory board on engineering and directed it to develop a Manual of Design for new structures. Additionally, the Department initiated a directive board to study the requirements of each project in its preliminary stage, analyzing such aspects as site optimization, general character of the building's design and its relationship with its surroundings, and selection of appropriate materials on a programmatic level to spread the benefits as much as possible among all the producing industries. The 1937 annual report for the Secretary of the Treasury discussed the application of regional vernaculars in implementing this design standardization:

A large portion of the program has consisted of small post office buildings spread over the entire United States. Type designs were developed, and in order to meet the varying requirements of the Post Office Department and the sectional architectural traditions, eleven designs were required. By thus standardizing the designs, there resulted a great saving in time and cost of production of the drawings and specifications, and the placing of these projects on the market was greatly expedited. The buildings which have been constructed from these type designs have proved economical and satisfactory. The policy of preparing drawings and specifications permitting to the greatest practicable extent the use of materials and products native to the localities has resulted in stimulating employment and spreading the benefits of the building program.¹²

The 1926 act had also included the provision for the government to engage private architects for "special case" projects. Before that time the Supervising Architect's office had handled the design work itself for all federal buildings. With such a large, lucrative body of public work at stake, the

¹²Quoted in Lois Craig, *The Federal Presence: Architecture, Politics, and Symbol in United States Government Building* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1977), 135.

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American Institute of Architects had lobbied to include non-government architectural offices in the design and construction management of public buildings, and during the late 1920s the Supervising Architect had begun to relent. By the early 1930s, the Supervising Architect still undertook the lion's share of design work. But, with the volume of work increasing tremendously during the Depression, private architects were retained, especially for work on larger projects such as the Wausau building.

The federal buildings erected during this period thus exhibited a range of architectural expression. On one hand were those structures designed by the Supervising Architect's Office. James A. Wetmore was the Acting Supervising Architect from 1915 to 1933. A graduate of the Columbia Law School, Wetmore was not himself an architect, the reason for the "Acting" before his title. Architectural direction for the office was given by the Superintendent of the Architectural Division Louis A. Simon, a stylistic traditionalist who in 1933 succeeded Wetmore as Supervising Architect—the Treasury's last. Simon (1867-1958) was born in Baltimore and educated at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. After a short period operating his own office, he joined the staff of the Supervising Architect's Office in 1896. In 1915, he was appointed chief of the Engineering and Drafting Division and, until his appointment at the head of the Office, he oversaw all phases of the architectural projects generated by the office. Under Simon's direction, the Supervising Architect executed hundreds of public buildings of varying scales with classical or revivalist façades and detailing during the 1920s and 1930s. His tenure as the Supervising Architect (1933-1939) was noted for its restraint and focus on mass and proportion rather than on elaboration and overt decoration. On the other hand were architects in the avant garde of the private sector. Embracing the tenets of the emerging Art Deco and Art Moderne styles—and a decade later the International Style—these architects executed public buildings that were relatively unembellished by ornamentation and austere compared with their Neoclassical peers. Between the two extremes, architects designed with a wide range of stylistic expression, combining new forms with borrowed revivalist or vernacular motifs or variously compromising between the classical and modern trends to create what is today termed as "starved classicism."

It is not known when a private architectural firm became involved in the design of the Wausau Federal Building—the record suggests that the earliest iterations had been generated by the Supervising Architect's office—but by 1935 the project had been turned over to Wausau architects Oppenhamer & Obel. As the city's most venerable architectural firm, Oppenhamer & Obel was a logical choice for the project. Irving A. Obel had been born in Sunbeken, Norway, in 1882 and studied architecture at the Norwegian Royal Academy before arriving in the United States at the age of 18. He worked in architectural offices in New York and Chicago before opening his own practice in Iowa in 1915. Four years later Obel moved to Wausau and joined the office of Swarthout, Speer & Oppenhamer. William A. Oppenhamer was born in Erie, Pennsylvania as William Oppenheimer. He studied architecture in Fort Wayne, Indiana and France, then practiced

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in Kalamazoo, Michigan and Chicago. Apparently, he moved to Wausau in the 1910s and entered into partnership with Swarthout and Speer sometime before 1918. Soon after Irving Obel came to town, by 1920, the two men had established their firm in an office on Third Street.¹³ Oppenhamer & Obel reportedly designed buildings totaling almost \$2 million in their first year together.¹⁴

As Wausau's most noteworthy and prolific architects, Oppenhamer & Obel were responsible for many of the city's most prominent public, commercial and residential buildings. These included the Elks Lodge (1924), the Grand Theater (1927), an addition to the Wausau Public Library (1928), the J.R. Brushert House (1928), and the Harold Fehland House (1935). Typical of many architectural firms of the period, Oppenhamer & Obel worked in a variety of architectural idioms, including Classical Revival for the Elks Club and Mediterranean Revival for the Brushert House. For the Fehland House, however, they eschewed traditional architecture in favor of a different stylistic idiom of the 1920s and 1930s—Art Deco—possibly influenced by their design work on the new post office at the time. “This unique style created quite a controversy,” states historian Mary Jane Hettinga. “It was a new architectural style for Wausau. The smooth walls of stucco had windows of glass block and there was even a flat roof.”¹⁵

For the Post Office, Oppenhamer and Obel employed Art Deco as well. Spawned by the Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs and Industriels Moderne held in Paris in 1925, the Art Deco style was applied to a multiplicity of building types in America during the Great Depression, eventually forming the basis for other modern architectural styles. “In the case of America,” architectural historian Marcus Whiffen has stated, “Art Deco did less by exhibiting any stylistic consistency in the buildings housing it than by diffusing a sentiment for modernity and the notion that it could be achieved by means of decoration.”¹⁶ Characteristics of the style include relatively simple forms and flat surfaces arranged in linear, determinedly modernistic or mechanical compositions, which were usually vertical in orientation. Exterior surfaces were often

¹³Oppenhamer & Obel maintained their office on Third Street until William Oppenhamer's death in 1950. Irving Obel then continued to practice alone until his death in November 1953. *Wright's Wausau City and Marathon County Directory*. Milwaukee: Wright Directory Company, 1918-1954; “Irving A. Obel, Architect, Dies.” *Wausau Daily Record-Herald*, 28 November 1953.

¹⁴“Local Architects Do Big Business in State in 1920.” *Wausau Pilot, Industrial and Historical Edition*, January 1921.

¹⁵Hettinga, Mary Jane Uecker. *Wausau Chronicles*. Wausau: Birch Lake Press, 2002.

¹⁶Marcus Whiffen, *American Architecture Since 1780: A Guide to Styles* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1969), 235.

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faceted and overlaid with a variety of decorative motifs, typically rendered in brick, terra cotta or architectural metals, but could also be relatively plain-faced as well.

Art Deco assumed a wide expressionistic range, from the sumptuously decorated movie houses then springing up across America to the myriad of small-scale, modestly rendered commercial buildings in the country's small towns. Oppenhamer & Obel, like many private architects commissioned for public works projects, employed a pared-back form of Art Deco for the Wausau Post Office. For this structure, they employed features that are decidedly modern: rhythmic steps of the exterior walls, emphasis on unbroken mass, regularity of the fenestration, and minimal use of stylized ornamentation. Still, the architects did not break entirely from their classical roots, incorporating into the building bilateral symmetry, a traditional division of vertical zones, incised paneling on the stone spandrels, and neoclassical elements at the main entrance.

Actually, Oppenhamer & Obel were following an established Wisconsin course in their relatively conservative use of Art Deco for the Wausau Post Office. "During the Depression, the Public Works Administration began spreading the new modernist trends in style," state Charles Causier and Joseph Jurkiewicz in the Multiple Property Documentation Form for Wisconsin post offices. "But the general public was a bit uncomfortable with modernism or internationalism. In an effort to search for past stability, the Period Revivals, primarily Georgian and Classical Revival styles, were revived for public architecture with their reassuring images of security. In Wisconsin, the styles for postal facilities were largely limited to the Art Moderne, Neo-Classical, Georgian Revival, and several other Period Revival styles."¹⁶

Other than the Wausau building, four Art Deco post offices have been identified by the Wisconsin Architecture & History Inventory: buildings at Rice Lake (1937) in Barron County, Fond du Lac (1937) in Fond du Lac County, Shawano (1938) in Shawano County, and Hayward (1942) in Sawyer County. All were constructed during the Depression as relatively small-scale structures, and all had been designed by the Supervising Architect's Office. Given Louis Simon's penchant for traditional architecture, it is unsurprising that these structures displayed a simplified version of Art Deco, abstaining from ostentatious displays of applied ornamentation in favor of slab-sided modernity. At least two of the buildings could be considered Art Deco only by their lack of ornamentation, rather than by any consciously applied design elements. Of the group, the Wausau Post Office hewed closest to Art Deco precepts. It is thus distinguished among Wisconsin's Depression-era federal buildings for the clarity of its architectural statement.

¹⁶ Charles W. Causier and Joseph G. Jurkiewicz, "United States Post Office Construction from 1913-1943: State of Wisconsin — Milwaukee District." National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form," 1994.

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The Wausau Post Office and Court House bridges the gap between the standard small post office and the large scale postal and federal facilities found in the nation's largest cities. While it is a work of a local architectural firm, the design for the Wausau federal building resembles, on a larger scale and with multiple stories, the "modern" design post offices generated by the Supervising Architects Office, for example those in Mayville (1939) and Janesville (1938). And, while classified as Art Deco, the Wausau building also has a similarity of appearance to the 18 post offices listed in the inventory as Art Moderne; all were built between 1936 and 1940. While stylistically it has elements in common with the standard post office designs constructed during Louis Simon's tenure, in its massing and scale and with greater elaboration and decorative features than standard post offices, the Wausau building also has similarities to the individually designed monumental post office /federal buildings of this period. Architecturally, it recognizably denotes the federal presence in Wausau.

Oppenhamer & Obel delineated the revised plans for the Wausau Federal Building in November 1936, with the first floor devoted to post office facilities and the upper floors given over to court-related spaces. Finally, in January 1937, the government announced that it was seeking competitive bids for the building's construction. Once again city officials were caught unawares. "Solicitation of bids came as a surprise to interested local persons and organizations," the *Record-Herald* remarked. "None was aware that action was being contemplated at this time. They agreed that the situation now looked hopeful for early completion of the 10-year-old proposal." The newspaper continued:

How soon after the bids are opened the contract will be let and construction begun was a matter of conjecture, but it was believed development would occur rapidly. With the asking of bids a major step forward was taken in the building plan which has been hanging fire more than a decade. From the time when the Wausau postoffice was placed on the federal building program in 1927 until the present, postponements, rejections, revisions of plans and a host of other obstacles have cropped up to prevent the actual construction.¹⁷

When the bids arrived in February, they were all rejected because the wage scales they proposed were considerably lower than the rates prevailing in Wausau. And when the revised bids were received a month later, they were rejected again as too high. The lowest proposal, made by the Midwest Construction Company of Minneapolis, totaled \$216,000—more than \$81,000 above

¹⁷"Contractors Asked to Enter Bids on Wausau Postoffice," *Wausau Daily Record-Herald*, 25 January 1937.

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budget. It appeared that the star-crossed project had reached yet another impasse, but with Congressman Boileau and Senator Duffy both pressuring the Treasury Department, the government quickly found the extra funds to make up the shortfall. At last, it appeared that the Post Office would be constructed.

On April 10, 1937, the government authorized Midwest to begin construction. The contractors were given 360 days to complete the project, but the project foreman predicted that they would have the building done by the first of the next year, "if we don't have any serious setbacks." A Midwest crew soon thereafter began excavating for the building's foundations. Midwest worked through the summer on the concrete foundations and steel superstructure, fabricated by the Wausau Iron Works. Construction continued through the autumn and winter of 1937 and into 1938. The only appreciable problem arose in July 1937 when the green granite spandrel panels for the façade arrived from the quarries in Virginia damaged. Milwaukee Railroad officials claimed that the edges and corners of the stones had been shattered after the massive stones had shifted en route. They were replaced with another set of stones.

One of the last aspects of construction on the Post Office was the installation of a large mural in the first floor stair hall off of the public lobby. Entitled "Lumbering Rural Mail," it featured a tableau of early Wausau lumbering and milling rendered using tempera in the Regionalist style. Milwaukee resident Gerrit Van Sinclair was the artist. A resident of Milwaukee, Sinclair had been born in 1890 in Grand Haven, Michigan, and studied art in the early 1910s under John Norton and John Vanderpoel at the Art Institute of Chicago. After a stint with the Army Ambulance Corps during World War I, he settled in Milwaukee, where he became a faculty member at the Layton School of Art. There he taught until his retirement in 1954; he died a year later. Sinclair exhibited widely, including venues such as the National Academy of Design, the Carnegie Institute and the Corcoran Gallery. A Regionalist painter of some note, his style has been described as a "blend of realism and impressionism but is clearly modern in its abstract concern for composition and color." He is best known for his Regionalist renderings of rural Wisconsin.

Sinclair's painting for the Wausau Post Office was one of many such government-sponsored murals executed for public works projects during the Depression. Between 1934 and 1943, the Roosevelt Administration maintained several public arts programs intended to provide employment for artists and elevate the level of public discourse about art and aesthetics. These included the Public Works of Art Project, an emergency relief program that lasted only six months in 1933-1934; the Federal Art Project, a large relief program devoted to the plastic arts; the Treasury Relief Art Project, which commissioned paintings and sculptures in federal buildings; and the Section of Painting and Sculpture, later the Section of Fine Arts, which was largely responsible for murals

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and sculptures installed in post offices throughout the country. Combined, the programs employed over 10,000 artists to produce some 100,000 paintings, 13,000 prints and over 4,000 murals. The Section of Fine Arts was the largest of these programs. Under it, commissions were awarded as a result of competitions often judged at a local level. These awards were made on the basis of artists' abilities and without regard for their individual financial situations; the Section of Fine Arts thus was not, strictly interpreted, a relief program. Initiated in October 1934 and discontinued in 1943, the program was responsible for awarding 1,400 contracts with an aggregate cost of \$2.6 million.

The stated aim of the Section of Fine Arts was to "secure murals and sculpture of distinguished quality appropriate to the embellishment of Federal buildings." In small communities, these pieces may have represented the only works of original public art. The subject matter depicted by these works was intended to be upbeat portrayals of local or national themes, rendered realistically and, generally speaking, literally, or at least metaphorically. As stated in the multiple property documentation form:

As a result, most of the artists sponsored through the government programs presented works in the Regionalist School. This was an approach that art historian H.W. Janson defined as one that 'sought to revive idealism by updating the American myth. . . largely in Midwestern terms.' The Regionalists differed from the other predominant group of the Depression era, the Social Realists, whose art depicted the despair of the times and often dealt with issues of social reform.¹⁸

Wisconsin artists under the program generally painted uplifting scenes taken from local or regional history, which patrons could identify easily and derive a feeling of optimism. Paul Faulkner, for instance, painted "Winter Sports" for the Kewaunee Post Office, which showed boys and girls frolicking with skis and sleds. And Eugene Higgins depicted pioneers felling trees and clearing the land before a backdrop of covered wagons in "The First Settlers" for the Shawano Post Office. Other post office murals from the period were Charles Thwaites' "Threshing Barley" in the Chilton Post Office and "Making Cheese" in the Plymouth Post Office, Ruth Grotenrath's "Unloading a River Barge" in the Hudson Post Office, Richard Jansen's "Dairy Farming" in the Reedsburg Post Office, and Stella Harlos' "The Land of Woods and Lakes" in the Hayward Post Office. For the Wausau Post Office, Gerrit Sinclair rendered an industrially themed scene depicting flannel-clad workers feeding logs into a sawmill before a backdrop of clear-cut forestland.

On March 29, 1938, the Post Office was completed, and Wausau citizens were allowed to view the mural and tour the new facility. The next week workmen moved furnishings from the old post office on Scott Street. Postmaster O.L. Ringle stated that the building would be formally dedicated

¹⁸ Causier and Jurkiewicz, "United States Post Office Construction from 1913-1943. . . "

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that summer after adjournment of Congress. But with the country still in the throes of a depression and Europe edging toward a world war, few people felt like celebrating. The new Wausau Federal Building was quietly placed into service, without formalities.

The new facility immediately became an integral part of the cultural fabric of the downtown district, as Wausau residents transacted business at the post office and, to a lesser extent, the courthouse and government offices on a daily basis. The Federal Building thus functioned in this manner through the 1940s and 1950s. In 1960, the Post Office opened the nation's first automated postal facility in Providence, Rhode Island. The success of this experimental station prompted another wave of construction by the Post Office Department during the 1960s, in which Depression-era buildings were replaced with larger, more machine-driven facilities.¹⁹

Post offices throughout the country thus took on a different character—from relatively compact central-city buildings to suburban malls for mailing. In the mid-1960s, the Post Office began planning the replacement for the post office in Wausau. Construction of a new building commenced early in 1968, and in 1969 the Wausau Post Office moved from the Federal Building on First Street to its new facility at the south end of Third Street.

After the move, the postal spaces on the building's first floor were converted to office spaces for several government agencies and elected representatives. The post office lobby was left intact, though the postal boxes and customer counters were removed. Probably because it was too heavy to move, the original walk-in safe was left in place. The upper floors continued to house Justice Department facilities. During the late 1990s the General Services Administration, which was responsible for the building's upkeep and disposition, began considering selling the Wausau Federal Building as a cost-savings measure.²⁰ In 1997 the government declared the post office as surplus property and began procedures to dispose of it. While the City Council debated whether or not the post office should be declared a local landmark, Wausau's Historic Landmarks Commission held hearings to determine the building's disposition. Everyone, it seemed, agreed that the post office was historic, but few wanted to assume the responsibility for its preservation.

"I am not opposed to taking a look at [acquiring] this building if it becomes available," stated City Councilman Richard Anklam, who advocated postponing the landmark designation in July 1998.

¹⁹The 1970 Postal Reorganization Act replaced the cabinet-level Post Office Department with the independent United States Postal Service, as which it functions today.

²⁰Jay Faherty, "Government Cuts Aimed at Costly Wausau Federal Building." *Wausau Daily Herald*, 10 July 1997.

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“But I’m not sure we need to take this type of action to prevent it from being demolished.”²¹

A month later the council voted 11-1 for acquiring the building; that December the Wisconsin State Historic Preservation Office issued a positive Determination of National Register eligibility. More recently, the National Park Service has compiled rehabilitation reports entitled “Examples of Contributing Elements Regarding National Register of Determination of Eligibility: Federal Building, Wausau, Wisconsin,” and “Program of Preservation and Utilization” which identify the historic elements that must be preserved.²² The building was transferred to Wausau under the Historic Surplus Property program. The City intends to lease it to MetroPlains Development of St. Paul, Minnesota, for rehabilitation. Sensitively rehabilitated, the Federal Building will again offer an opportunity for preservation and interpretation of this important aspect of Wausau history.

Conclusion

The Wausau United States Post Office and Court House is locally significant as the location of federal governmental services throughout the period of significance. With the post office located in the building’s first floor, for most residents it represented the most common interaction with federal governmental functions. The presence of the courthouse extended the federal presence to the broader region. Together with the 1955 Marathon County Courthouse, the Wausau federal building is only one of two extant historic government related buildings in the city.

The building is further significant under criterion C as a local example of the Art Deco style applied to a federal building. The only other comparable building in the city is the 1941 former Employers Mutual Liability Headquarters Building; it became the city hall in 1967. The exterior of the Wausau United States Post Office and Court House retains a very high degree of integrity and displays the Art Deco style through its use of tall piers and vertical banks of windows enlivened with stone spandrels. The lobby retains its marble wainscoting and marble pilasters with carved medallions. The courtroom also retains its historic appearance, including the original furniture.

Alterations to the building have been minimal. As a result, it is a good and well preserved example of the style.

²¹Christina T. O’Brien, “Council Postpones Landmark Status for Federal Building.” *Wausau Daily Herald*, 29 July 1998.

²²McCutchen, Brian K. “Examples of Contributing Elements Regarding National Register Determination of Eligibility.” National Park Service, December 2003; “Program of Preservation and Utilization: Wausau Federal Building.” National Park Service. February 2011.

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Wausau, Marathon County, Wisconsin

Verbal Boundary Description

Part of Block 8, Plat of the Village of Wausau (Original Plat of the City of Wausau), described as follows:

Commencing at the intersection of the south line of said Block 8 and a line 29 feet easterly of and parallel with the easterly line of Block 1, said Block 8, the point of beginning. Thence westerly along said line of Block 8 to the easterly right-of-way of North First Street; thence northerly along said easterly right-of-way to the southerly right-of-way of Jefferson Street; thence easterly along said southerly right-of-way to a line 29 feet easterly of and parallel with the east lines of Lots 1, 45, 7 and 8, said Block 8; thence southerly along said parallel line to said south line of Block 8, the point of beginning.

Total acreage: approximately 0.8 acres.

Boundary Justification

The boundaries of the nominated area coincide with the legal and historical boundaries for the property.

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Section photos Page 1

United States Post Office and Court House
Wausau, Marathon County, Wisconsin

Photographs

Name of property: United States Post Office and Court House
City or vicinity: Wausau
County / state: Marathon County, Wisconsin
Photographer: Clayton B. Fraser, FRASERdesign
Photo date: September 2011
Inkjet prints: Epson Stylus Pro 4000 Printer with Ultrachrome ink on Epson Archival Matte paper
Location of Original Digital Files: FRASERdesign, 5700 Jackdaw Drive, Loveland CO, 80537

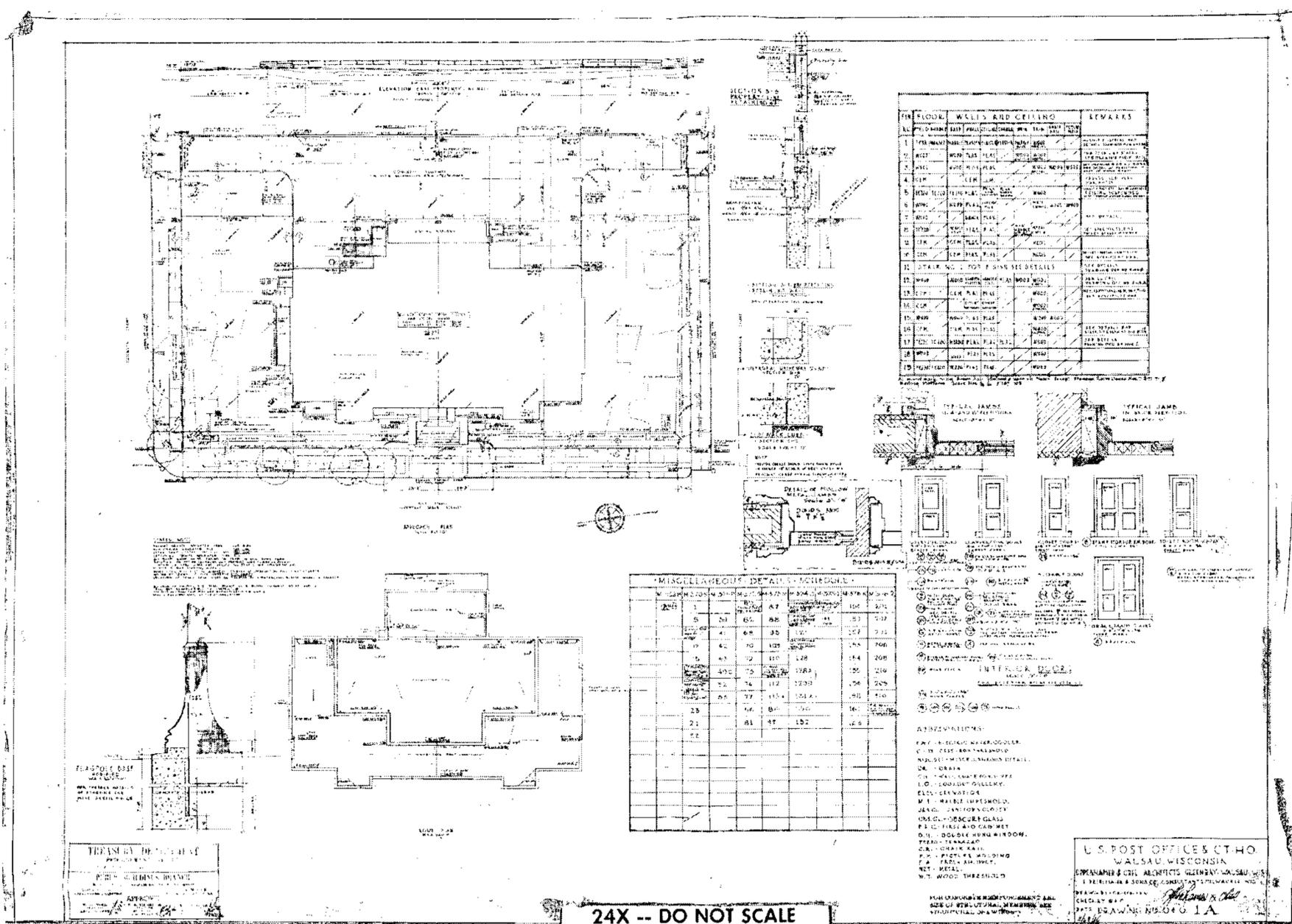
- Photo 1 of 18** Overall view of Federal Building and environs. View to southwest.
Photo 2 of 18 Overall view of Federal Building and First Street. View to south.
Photo 3 of 18 Overall view of Federal Building and First Street. View to east.
Photo 4 of 18 West front of Federal Building. View to east.
Photo 5 of 18 West front and north side of Federal Building. View to southeast.
Photo 6 of 18 East rear of Federal Building. View to west.
Photo 7 of 18 East rear and south side of Federal Building. View to northwest.
Photo 8 of 18 South side and west front of Federal Building. View to northeast.
Photo 9 of 18 Detail of granite spandrel panel on west front of Federal Building. View to east.
Photo 10 of 18 Detail of cornerstone in southwest corner of building. View to east.
Photo 11 of 18 Interior view of first-floor post office lobby. View to north.
Photo 12 of 18 Interior view of Gerrit Sinclair mural, "Lumbering / Rural Mail," in first-floor post office lobby. View to east.
Photo 13 of 18 Interior view of first-floor Congressional office, showing walk-in safe doorway. View to east.
Photo 14 of 18 Interior view of second-floor courtroom. View to south.
Photo 15 of 18 Interior view of second-floor courtroom. View to north.
Photo 16 of 18 Interior view of second-floor FBI office. View to west.
Photo 17 of 18 Interior view of second-floor U.S. Marshal's office, showing detention cell. View to north.
Photo 18 of 18 Interior view of third-floor jury room. View to east.

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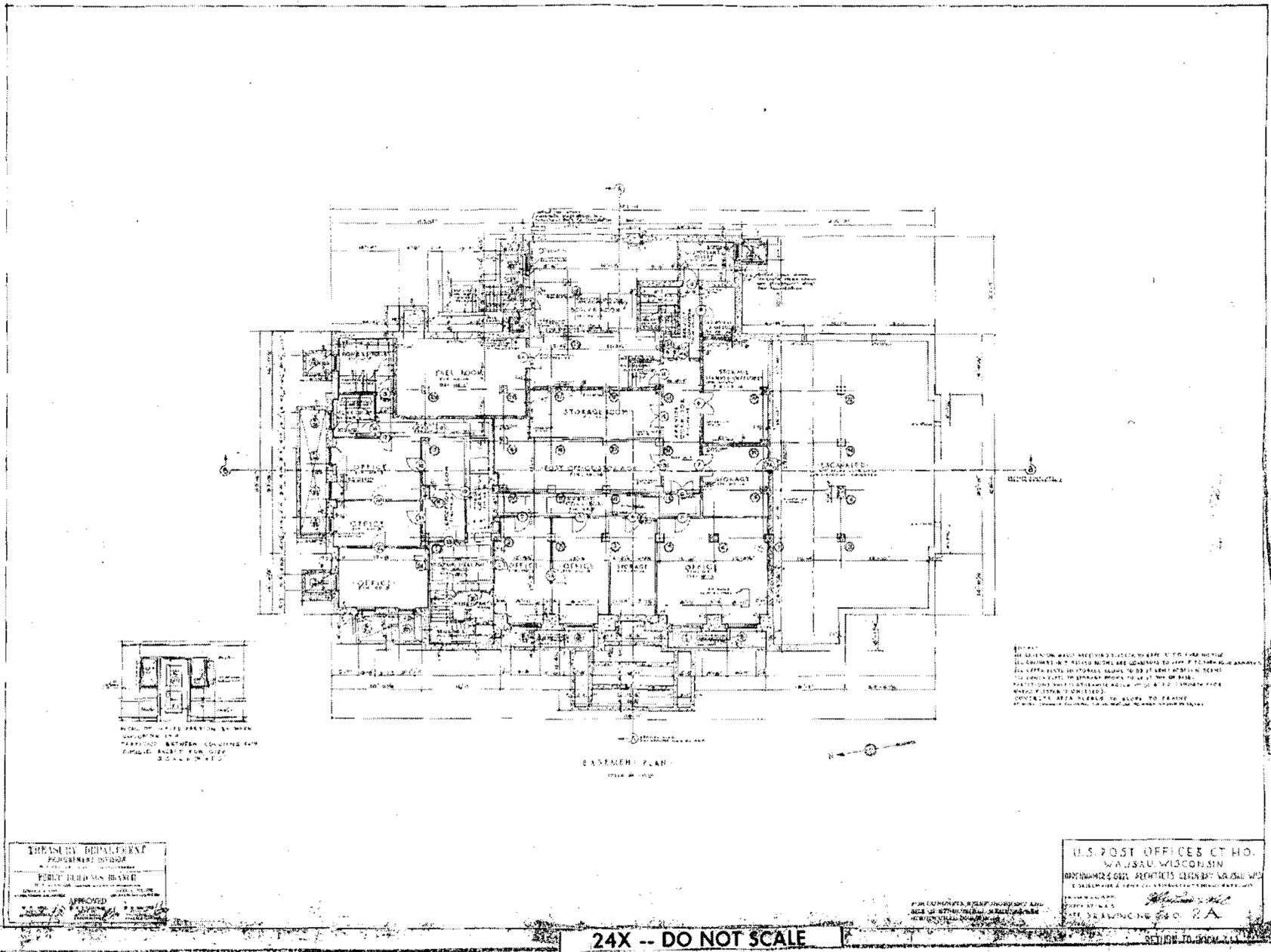


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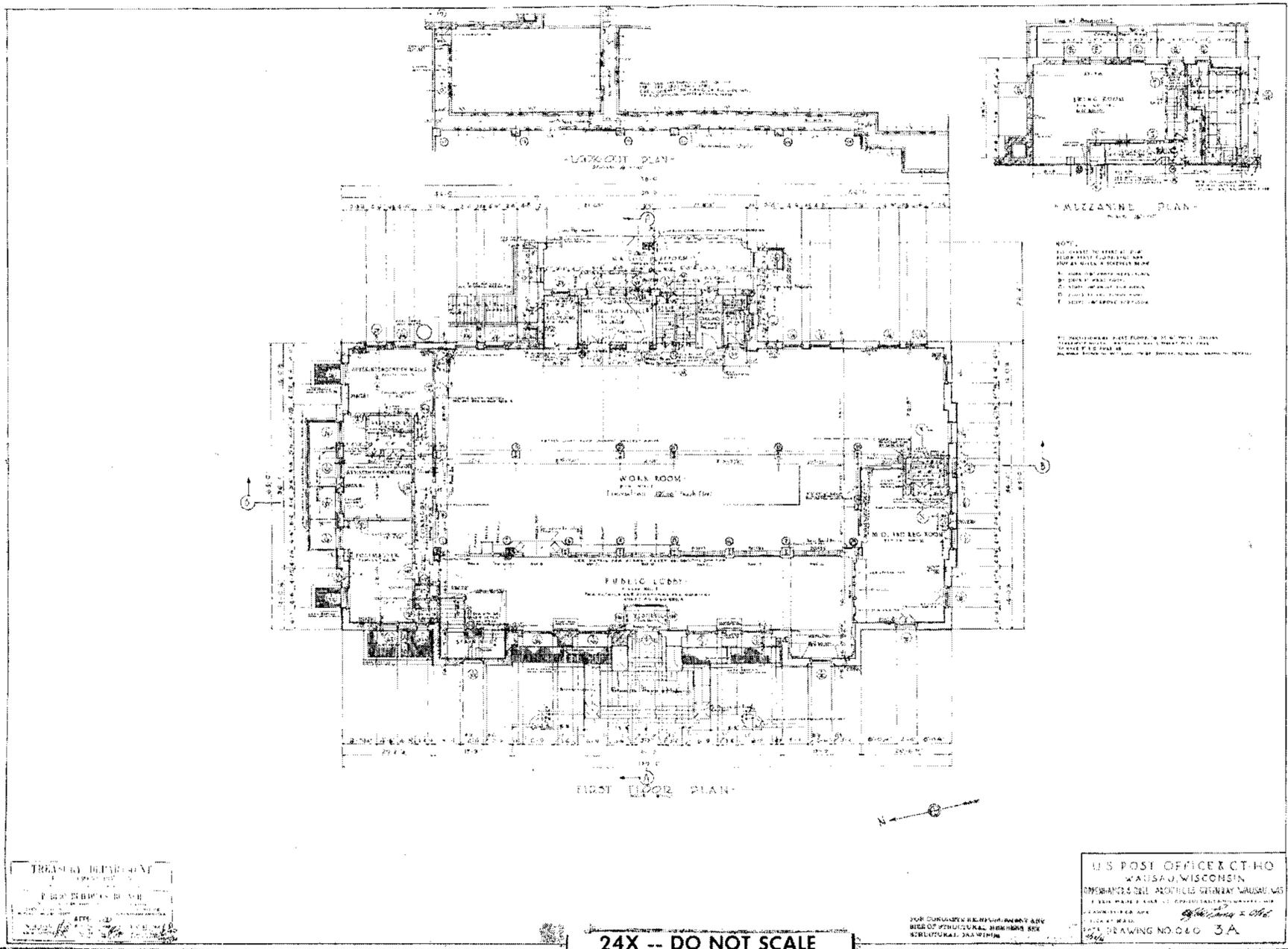


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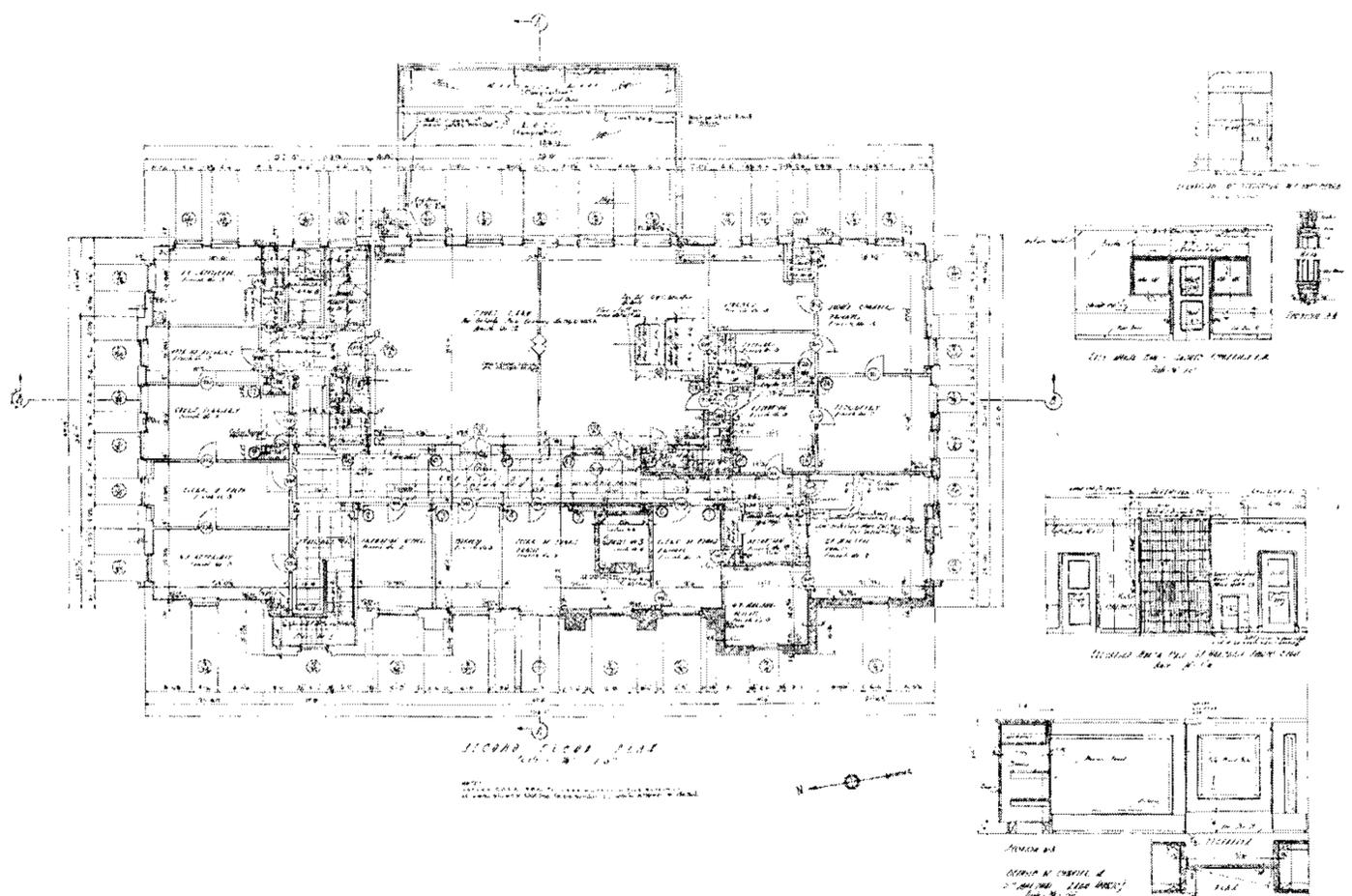


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Wausau, Marathon County, Wisconsin



THE TREASURY DEPARTMENT
PLANNING DIVISION
PUBLIC BUILDINGS BRANCH
WASHINGTON, D.C.

NOTE
ALL EXTERIOR WALLS
TO BE CONCRETE
TO HAVE 6" O.C.
SPACING FOR
REINFORCING BARS
AND TO BE FINISHED
WITH STUCCO.

U.S. POST OFFICE & CT-HO.
WAUSAU, WISCONSIN
CONTRACT NO. 1011-40-100-0001
DRAWING NO. 04-D. 4 A

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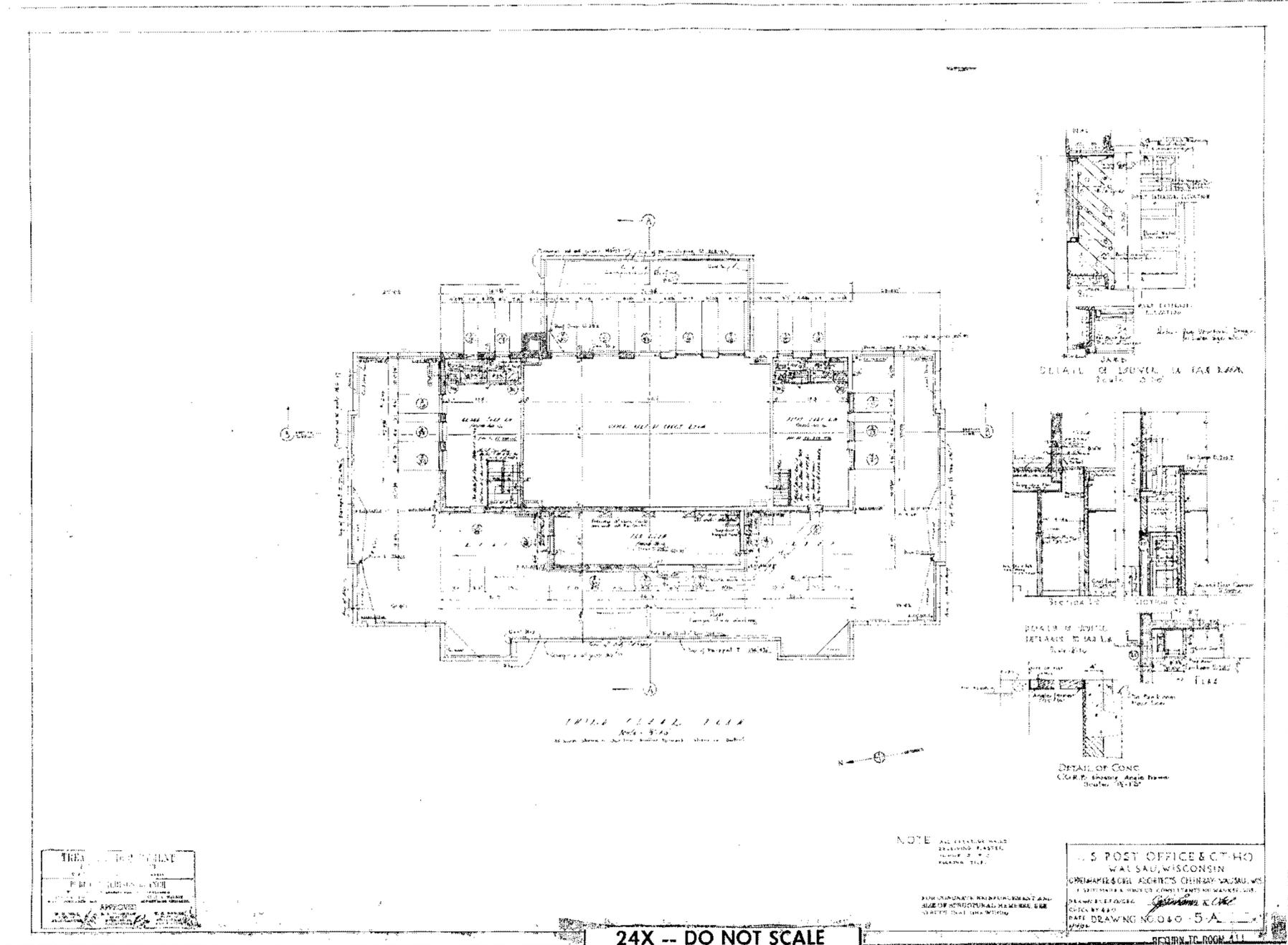
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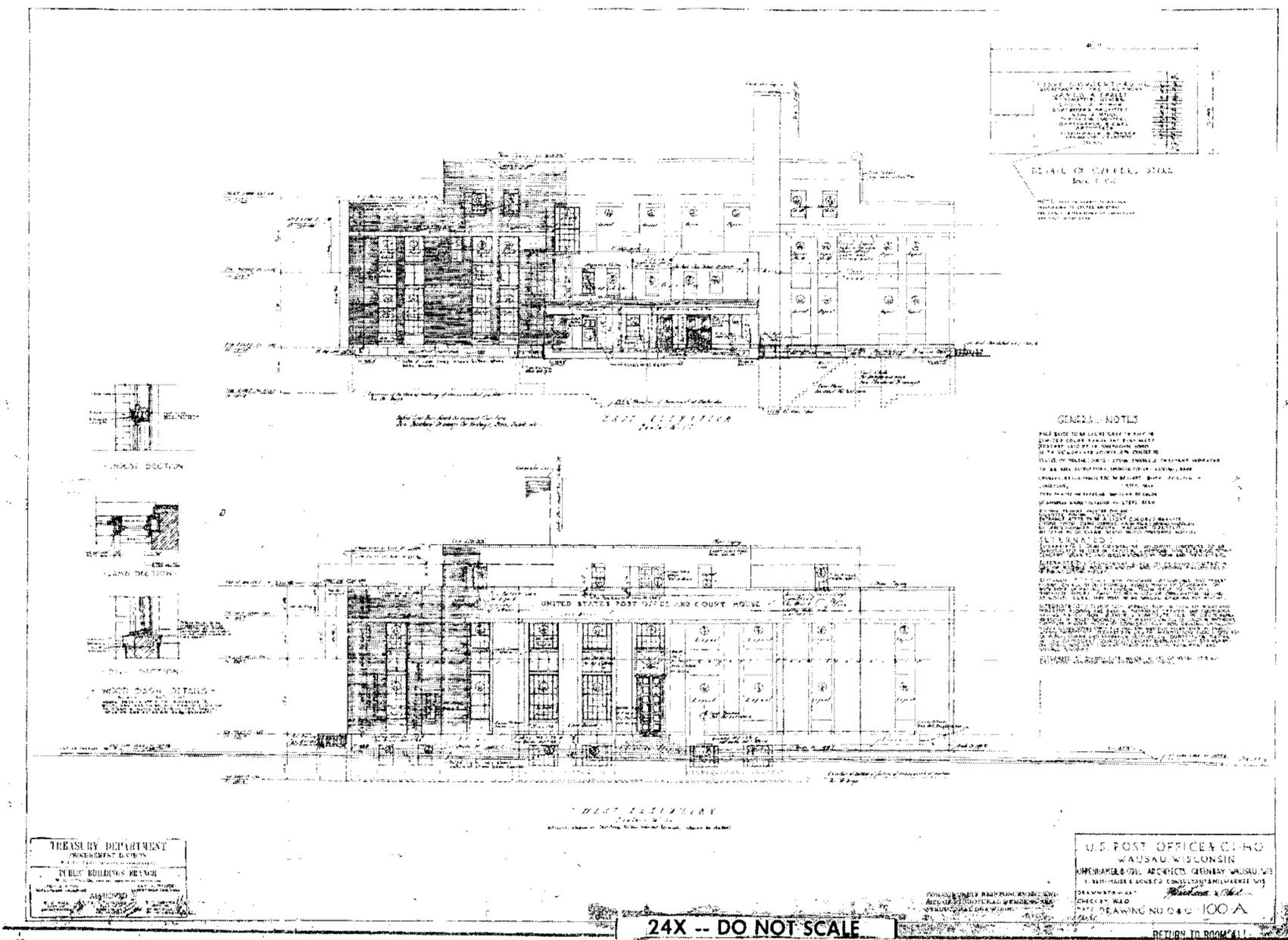


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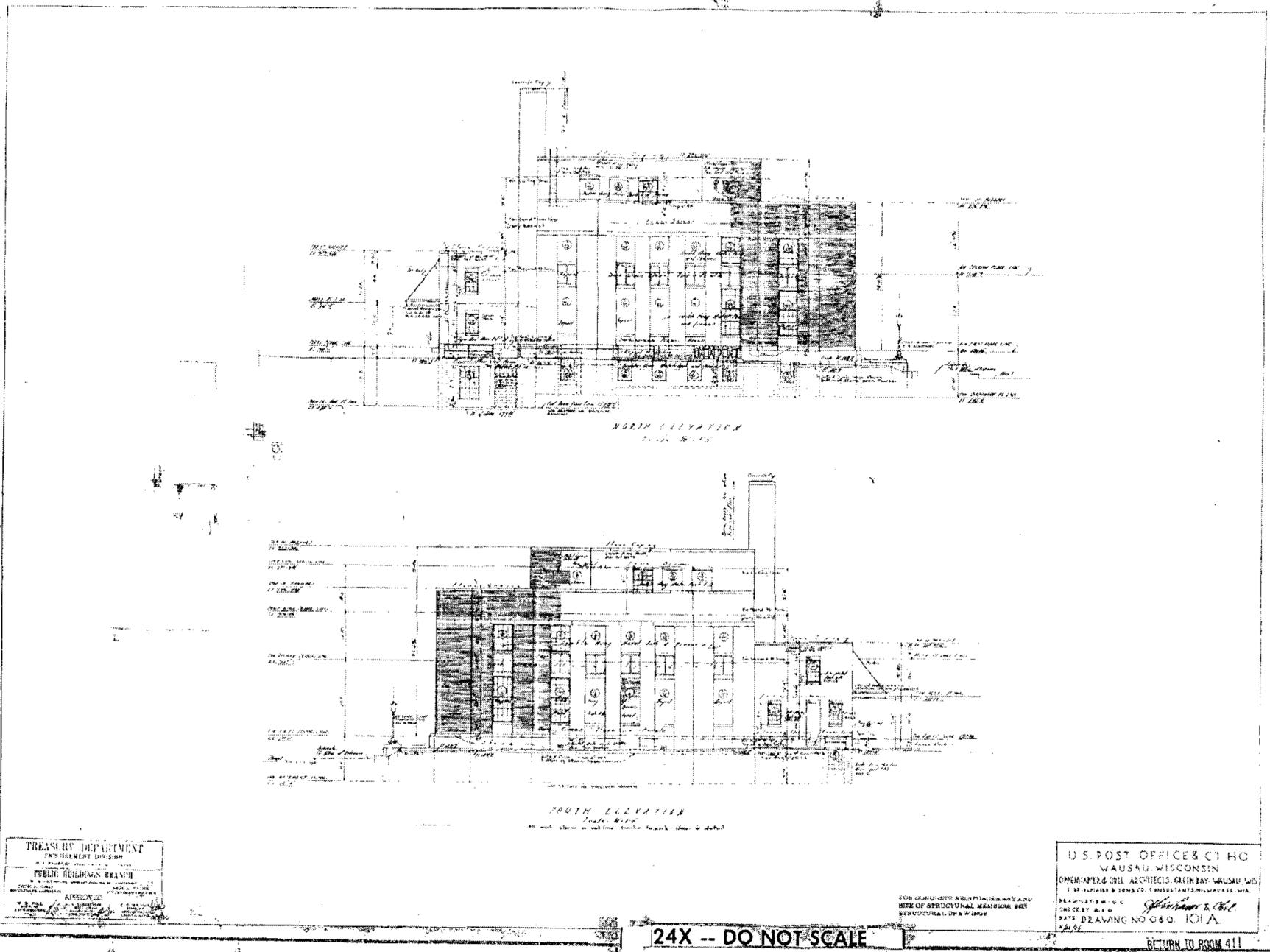


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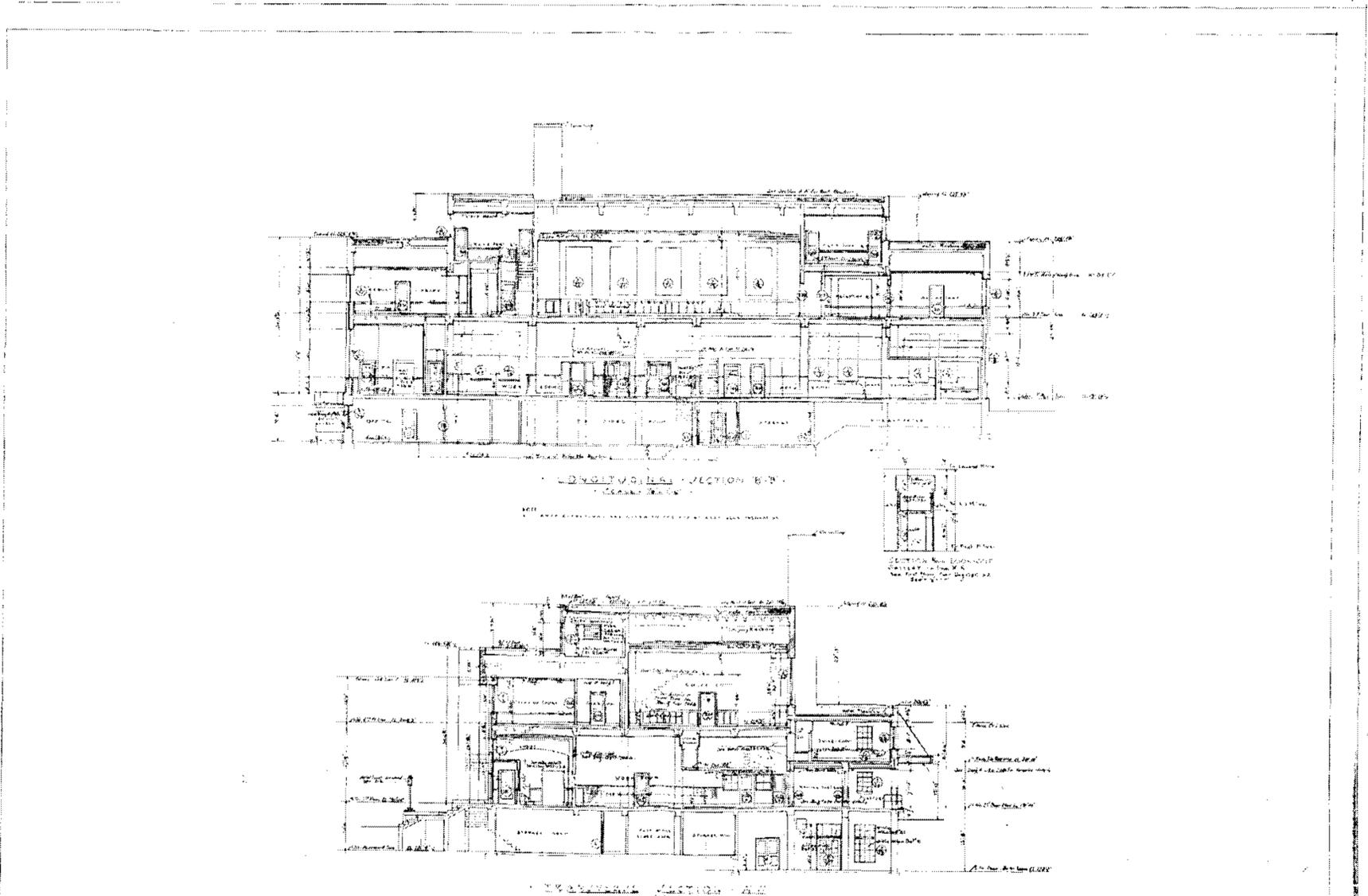


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