



NHL Executive Summary



South Façade, National Archives Building

Name of Property:	National Archives Building
City, State:	Washington, D.C.
Period of Significance:	1931-1965
NHL Criteria:	1, 4
NHL Theme:	III. Expressing Cultural Values 5. Architecture, Landscape Architecture, and Urban Design IV. Shaping the Political Landscape 2. Governmental Institutions
Previous Recognition:	National Register of Historic Places (NRHP), as contributing element of Federal Triangle Historic District, 1973; NRHP, individual listing, 1973

National Historic Context: Special study

NHL Significance:

- Built between 1931 and 1938, the monumental headquarters of the National Archives is an exceptional example of American Classicism in art and architecture designed by one of its foremost practitioners, John Russell Pope. The building is one of Pope's most prominent public commissions and reflects the apogee of American Classicism in architecture. The building is a signature piece of the Federal Triangle, a major civic art program in Washington, DC, and one of the costliest and most expansive government office building programs in the nation's history.
- The National Archives Building is exceptional as the first purpose-built national repository for the United States' federal documents. Its creation reflects the confluence of the growing power and reach of



the federal bureaucracy with the desire of citizens, especially historians, to have reliable access to the nation's records.

- The institution and its iconic building are emblematic of Progressive-Era goals of creating an educated, civic-minded populace by facilitating access to knowledge. Progressive reform ideas reflected in the archive idea included the goal of applying scientific study to the problems of government and civic reform.
- The National Archive Building was also a product of American cultural nationalism of the era. The institution was conceived and built during a period when American elites sought to prove that American culture was equal or superior to European culture. The creation of the Archives was an integral part of a campaign to make Washington into a world-class capital city applying the principles of the City Beautiful movement.
- The building's architectural period of significance [NHL Criterion 4] encompasses its construction between 1931 and 1938, the period when it acquired the design attributes that identify it as a monument of American Classicism.
- The National Archives Building's historical significance [NHL Criterion 1] extends from 1931 through its period of early development to the end of the third archivist's tenure in 1965. From its opening in 1935 through 1965, the National Archives pursued and pioneered innovative archival techniques, building a world-class institution and promulgating methods and practices that other archives followed.
- In 1952, as initially envisioned, the building's exhibit hall became the permanent home and display space for the Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution, and the Bill of Rights, thus establishing the building as a major civic pilgrimage site for those interested in the origins of American democracy.

Integrity:

- The National Archives retains the majority of the essential physical features that enable the property to convey its significance as the repository of the United States' most important documents and as an architectural landmark. The exterior retains all of its major features with few alterations. Changes on the interior happened largely in secondary spaces and do not impact the property's ability to convey its importance both as a nationally important government institution and as a key work of prominent American Classicist, John Russell Pope and a series of well-known sculptors.
- The exterior remains largely as built with minor modifications, while the primary interior public spaces including the rotunda, the reading room, stacks, and primary office spaces and conference rooms retain most of their historic form and detailing.

Owner of Property: National Archives and Records Administration, United States Government

Acreage of Property: 5.32

Origins of Nomination: The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) contacted the National Park Service (NPS) with an interest in landmark designation to promote both the role of NARA over the years and the building's architecture. The National Park Service, National Capitol Area contracted with John Russell Pope scholar and consultant Steven Bedford, Ph.D. of WSP USA Inc. to prepare the nomination.



Potential for Positive Public Response or Reflection on NHL Program:

- Designation as an NHL will recognize an exceptional property associated with the preservation and dissemination of American history.
- Designation will highlight the complicated origins of the institution and reveal its importance beyond its architecture and associations with the Charters of Freedom.

Potential for Negative Public Response or Reflection on NHL Program: None known.

Public Comments Favoring Designation (received as of August 21, 2023):

- Rebecca Miller, Executive Director, DC Preservation League
- Kim Williams, National Register Coordinator, DC Historic Preservation Office

National Historic Landmarks Committee Comments:

- Consider adding the Franklin Delano Roosevelt memorial as a contributing resource for FDR's contributions to the creation of the National Archives.
- Add more information about the Pope landscape if possible and clarify what landscape resources contribute or not. Add a photograph or two showing some of the landscape elements.
- Add documentation about the issue of segregation in the National Archives and the connection with segregation policies of the Federal Government at the time.

National Historic Landmarks Committee Recommendation:

The Committee recommends that the National Park System Advisory Board recommend to the Secretary of the Interior the designation of the National Archives Building in Washington, DC, as a National Historic Landmark, with any additions and corrections as noted by the Committee being made prior to the nomination being forwarded to the Secretary of the Interior for action.

Advisory Board Recommendation: The National Park System Advisory Board recommends to the Secretary of the Interior the designation of the National Archives Building in Washington, DC, as a National Historic Landmark.