

United States Post Office
Ellicott Street
Buffalo
Erie County
New York

HABS No. NY-5605

HABS
NY,
15-BUF,
11-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

UNITED STATES POST OFFICE

HABS
NY,
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11-

Location: Ellicott Street, situated on a square block bounded on the north by South Division Street, on the south by Swan Street, on the east by Oak Street, and on the west by Ellicott Street, Buffalo, Erie County, New York

Present Owner: U. S. Government

Present Occupant: Various federal agencies, including a branch post office

Present Use: Offices and a branch post office

Statement of Significance: This imposing structure with its Gothic Revival detailing appears to have massing similar to that found in the institutional work of H. H. Richardson. However, while the design reflects concepts evident in Richardson's State Hospital of 1870-71 (HABS No. NY-5606), and Post's Erie County Savings Bank of 1890 (HABS No. NY-5615), it does not take into account the design advances seen in Adler and Sullivan's Prudential Building of 1894 (HABS No. NY-5487), and D. H. Burnham's Ellicott Square Building of 1895. These commercial buildings are located within three blocks of the U. S. Post Office.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: Contract for the excavation was awarded September 6, 1894, to Forrestal and McConnell. The cornerstone was laid June 19, 1897. The building was ready for occupancy by early 1901. The post office was dedicated March 20, 1901.
2. Architect: Jeremiah O'Rourke was the Supervising Architect of the United States Department of the Treasury at the time the design for the Buffalo Post Office was completed, c. 1894. There are letters in the files of the Supervising Architect concerning the wish of the American Institute of Architects to have all proposed government buildings open to design competitions. This post office was to be a test case. However, relations became very strained between O'Rourke and D. H. Burnham, then president of the AIA. O'Rourke's force of draftsmen and

engineers and/or O'Rourke himself assumed responsibility for the design.

3. Original and subsequent owners: The site was purchased February 6, 1892, for \$476,250. It was previously divided into many small residential parcels which were serviced by Booth Alley. By order of the Buffalo City Council, the alley was closed to accommodate the purchase of the land by the government. Various Acts of Congress provided the authority for purchase and construction. (See Acts of Congress, April 5, 1888; March 3, 1891; March 3, 1893; August 18, 1894; March 2, 1895; June 11, 1896; June 4, 1897; July 1, 1898; and March 3, 1899.)
4. Builder or contractor, suppliers: George J. Metzger was Superintendent of Construction. The contract for the superstructure was awarded to John Pierce, 324 11th Street, Washington, D. C. The buff brick was manufactured by the Columbus, Ohio, Buff Brick and Terra Cotta Company. All materials used were inspected by Hallsted and McNaugher, Park Building, Pittsburgh. Steel girders were furnished by the Carnegie Steel Company, Ltd. The Peoria Heating Company was the contractor for the installation of heating and ventilating systems. All lock boxes and vaults were provided by Yale and Towne Manufacturing Company. Elevators were made and installed by the Otis Elevator Company. All hardware was supplied by the Russell and Erwin Company. The skylight contract was awarded to E. S. Hulse of Washington, D. C. All plaster casts were made by C. W. Buhler, 1130 14th Street, N.W., Washington, D. C. The cost of the construction to December, 1900, was \$1,522,000.
5. Original plans: Approximately thirty-nine sheets of blueprints of the original plans are on file at the National Archives.
6. Alterations and additions: In 1936, a \$200,000 remodeling and modernizing project provided more office space.

B. Historical Events Connected with the Structure:

The U. S. Post Office occupied the entire first floor of this structure until November 2, 1963, when the new post office at the Central Terminal opened. All government services originally housed in the U. S. Customhouse (HABS No. NY-5609) were moved to this building in 1901, post office, custom office, Bureau of Internal Revenue, courts,

pension agency, Steamboat Inspection Service, Light-House Board, etc. Most of these services which remained in the building after 1963, were transferred to the new General Services Administration Building on Delaware Avenue. (See HABS No. NY-5613.) The branch post office still (1973) remains.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old views: Photographs were taken during construction for government records and information. These, however, have not been located. The Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society has a minimum of thirty photographs contained within the Iconographic File. A photograph showing a nearly completed structure, c. late 1900, was published in A History of Public Buildings Under the Control of the Treasury Department, 1901.
2. Bibliography:
 - a. Primary and unpublished sources:

Public Building Service Records, National Archives.
Letters Received, Buffalo Post Office, 1892-.
Letters Sent Chiefly by Supervising Architect, 1892-.
Title papers, site registers.
 - b. Secondary and published sources:

Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society. Minimum of twelve indexed references to newspaper articles.
Buffalo Express. March 21, 1901.
Ferssald, Frederick Atherton. Index Guide to Buffalo and Niagara Falls. Buffalo, 1910.
A History of Public Buildings Under the Control of the Treasury Department. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1901.
3. Likely sources not yet investigated: None known.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: By relieving the mass of the block-square building with slightly projecting corner

pavilions, the architects have reduced the Gothic Revival decorative treatment to a surface exercise.

2. Condition of fabric: Good.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: This 4-1/2-story structure with raised basement measures 260 feet by 220 feet and contains 4,704,782 cubic feet. The roof line is 118 feet above ground. The prominent tower, 244 feet high, is centered in the west facade.
2. Foundations: The granite-faced foundation has a water table which indicates the separation between the first floor and the elevated basement.
3. Wall construction: The pink granite quarried at Spruce Head and Jonesboro, Maine, was shipped by the schooners "Harvester," "G. A. Lowry," and "Ned P. Walker" from Vinal Haven, Maine. The walls of granite ashlar masonry have a slightly rusticated treatment on the first floor and elevated basement. All other surfaces are finished with highly dressed granite.
4. Structural system: The interior framing system is composed of steel beams.
5. Porches: The three deeply recessed entrances are contained within projecting porches. Stone stairs extend beyond the enclosure of the porches. A covered loading dock which opens into the large workroom, is located on the Oak Street side.
6. Chimneys: The chimneys are hidden by the Gothic Revival roof detailing.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways: The major entrance, which faces west on Ellicott Street, contains three deeply recessed arched openings. These give access to three arched doorways, each containing two-leaf doors with glass lights. This projecting entrance is elaborately treated with gables, gallery, and piers. The center gable, capping the center entrance, is topped with a full sculpture of the American eagle. The entrance composition extends to the windows two bays to the left and right of the entrance: centered at the meeting of two applied gables is a large sculpted head of a buffalo; a small wolf head is tucked in the far right corner of the outer gable in the right-

hand bays; in the far left corner, in the left-hand bays. The form of the entrances on the south and north sides is similar; however, these entrances do not have elaborate and complex decorations.

- b. Windows: There are 400 windows in this structure. Most of them have one-over-one, double-hung sash. All windows are grouped in an arrangement controlled by various applied architectural details. In the first floor, two windows are contained within a Gothic arch. All second- and third-floor windows are grouped vertically as well as horizontally.
8. Roof: The main block of the building has a mansard roof covered with tile which is bordered with copper cresting and flashing. A large hipped skylight, 117 feet by 184 feet, is centered in the block. Each corner pavilion has a hipped roof with the same covering. All gabled dormers piercing the mansard and hipped roofs are finished with stone moldings and finials or crockets. The granite cornice is bracketed. The rectangular granite-faced tower shaft, which extends from the west projecting entrance porch through the roof, is topped by a short, crocketed spire. Engaged turrets, marking the upper corners, frame the two levels of openings. Gargoyles project from the cornice of the upper level. Sculpted eagles perch at the corners of the lower cornice. *vs. LAON*

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plan: The center core of the first floor is reserved for official post-office business. This center work area has a glazed ceiling. The main corridor extends around the north, west and south sides of the building. Each of the four upper stories has an open gallery or corridor facing on an interior courtyard: the floor of the courtyard is formed by the glazed ceiling of the first-floor work area. The hipped skylight covers the courtyard. Arranged around the corridors are 156 office rooms. The basement contains all mechanical equipment.
2. Stairways: The two open stairways--one at each end of the lobby located inside the main entrance in the west facade--extend from the first floor to the fifth floor. From the first to the second floor these stairways are finished with marble treads, risers, newels, and railings. Beyond this point the stairway has cast-iron balusters and newels and a molded wooden hand-rail. All cast-iron elements have Gothic Revival ornamentation. Adjoining the Ellicott and Swan Street entrances are four electric elevators.

3. Flooring: All floors in the public portions are terrazzo.
 4. Wall and ceiling finish: On the first floor, the main corridor is a Gothic Revival colonnade with groin vaults springing from marble columns. The paired, smooth-shafted engaged columns with Corinthian capitals are set on large marble plinths. Originally the plaster vaults had stenciled decorations. The walls are finished with a marble wainscot and molding and glazed brick above. All other corridors have glazed brick wainscot and plaster walls and ceilings. All offices have oak woodwork and plaster walls and ceilings.
 5. Doorways and doors: All first-floor corridor doors are mahogany with glass lights; all doorways are arched and fitted with mahogany frames. All other floors have oak doors with lights set in arched oak frames. All doors have arched transom lights.
 6. Special decorative features: On the first floor, many transoms are filled with stained-glass panels depicting the seals of the various departments of government which were originally represented in the building. All woodwork surrounding the wickets and letter boxes is mahogany. A mosaic panel with the date of the building is located above the interior center entrance of the west facade. The fourth floor contained the circuit and district courtrooms. These are finished with a high marble wainscot topped with oak paneling. The interior of the courtyard is finished with architectural elements stacked to accommodate four stories of openings. Each level has a different scale and grouping of openings into the corridors.
 7. Hardware: All hardware is brass.
 8. Lighting: Each main vault arch is lined with incandescent bulbs, twenty-one to each arch.
 9. Heating: Originally there were four horizontal tubular boilers in the basement.
- D. Site:
1. General setting and orientation: The building faces west, across a busy commercial street two blocks east of Main Street.
 2. Walks: Sidewalks now fill the square block on three sides. Old photographs show narrower walks with strips of grass meeting the foundation.

Prepared by Susan R. Slade
September 1973

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

This photo-data book was prepared as part of a 1964-65 recording project in cooperation with the Buffalo-Western New York Chapter of AIA, Olaf William Shelgren (at that time Chairman of the Chapter's Preservation Committee), and Olaf William Shelgren, Jr.--both, of the firm Shelgren, Patterson and Marzec. Photographs were taken in May, 1965, by Jack E. Boucher, HABS Staff Photographer. Under the direction of John C. Poppeliers, Chief, HABS, a further research and editorial project was undertaken in September, 1973, by Susan R. Slade, architectural historian.