



U.S. Post Office AND COURTHOUSE

SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS

AS STEWARDS OF MORE THAN 400 HISTORIC PUBLIC BUILDINGS PROVIDING MORE THAN 50 MILLION SQUARE FEET OF SPACE, THE U.S. GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION (GSA) IS PLEASED TO CELEBRATE AMERICA'S ARCHITECTURAL TREASURES THROUGH THE PUBLIC BUILDINGS HERITAGE PROGRAM.

HISTORICALLY, FEDERAL PUBLIC BUILDINGS WERE DESIGNED TO WELCOME THE VISITING PUBLIC AND TO CONVEY THE IMPORTANT ROLE THE GOVERNMENT PLAYED IN THE DAILY LIVES OF ITS CITIZENS. INTEGRATED INTO THE DESIGN OF MANY OF THESE BUILDINGS ARE INSCRIPTIONS AND WORKS OF ART DEPICTING THE CIVIL FUNCTIONS HOUSED WITHIN THEM. IT IS A TESTIMONY TO THE DURABILITY OF THESE DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION STANDARDS THAT MANY OF THESE BUILDINGS CONTINUE TO SERVE THE PURPOSE FOR WHICH THEY WERE ORIGINALLY BUILT, WHILE OTHERS DEMONSTRATE THE ABILITY OF HISTORIC PUBLIC BUILDINGS TO SERVE NEW FUNCTIONS. AS PART OF ITS COMMITMENT TO URBAN REINVESTMENT AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION, GSA IS WORKING TO MAINTAIN THE ARCHITECTURAL EXCELLENCE OF AMERICA'S PUBLIC BUILDINGS WHILE ALSO KEEPING THEM USEFUL, SAFE AND ACCESSIBLE TO THE PUBLIC. THROUGH GSA'S DESIGN EXCELLENCE, CONSTRUCTION EXCELLENCE, AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT/GOOD NEIGHBOR PROGRAMS, THE AGENCY CONTINUES THE TRADITION OF BUILDING TOMORROW'S PUBLIC LANDMARKS.

ABOVE:
DETAIL OF AN ORIGINAL BRONZE LIGHT FIXTURE IN THE LOBBY.

COVER:
MASSIVE ARCHED OPENINGS WITH DECORATIVE METAL GRILLES MARK THE ENTRANCE.

ALL PHOTOS: GERALD MOORHEAD

GSA

U.S. GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
OFFICE OF THE CHIEF ARCHITECT
CENTER FOR HISTORIC BUILDINGS
PUBLIC BUILDINGS HERITAGE PROGRAM

U.S. GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION

BUILDING HISTORY

THE U.S. POST OFFICE AND COURTHOUSE IS AN IMPORTANT LANDMARK AND SYMBOL OF CONTINUED FEDERAL PRESENCE IN DOWNTOWN SAN ANTONIO. SITUATED ACROSS FROM THE HISTORIC ALAMO, THE BUILDING HOLDS A PROMINENT POSITION IN ALAMO PLAZA, ONE OF THE CITY'S THREE MAJOR PLAZAS.

THE BUILDING WAS A PRODUCT OF THE FEDERAL PUBLIC WORKS PROGRAMS ENACTED TO RELIEVE WIDESPREAD UNEMPLOYMENT DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION OF THE 1930s. ITS CONSTRUCTION ACCOMPLISHED SEVERAL GOALS—GENERATING EMPLOYMENT, HOUSING ALL FEDERAL AGENCIES IN A SINGLE BUILDING, AND STREAMLINING SAN ANTONIO'S QUICKLY EXPANDING POSTAL NEEDS.

PROMINENT LOCAL ARCHITECT RALPH HAYWOOD CAMERON DESIGNED THE BUILDING IN ASSOCIATION WITH RENOWNED PHILADELPHIA ARCHITECT PAUL PHILIPPE CRET UNDER THE DIRECTION OF THE OFFICE OF THE SUPERVISING ARCHITECT OF THE U.S. TREASURY DEPARTMENT. BOTH CAMERON AND CRET STUDIED AT THE PRESTIGIOUS ECOLE DES BEAUX-ARTS IN PARIS. CAMERON, A NATIVE TEXAN WHO ALSO DESIGNED THE DEWITT COUNTY COURTHOUSE, WENT ON TO BECOME ONE OF THE LEADING BEAUX-ARTS ARCHITECTS OF SOUTH TEXAS, AND CRET WAS NATIONALLY RECOGNIZED AS ONE OF THE FOREMOST PRACTITIONERS OF THE STYLE. A CEREMONIAL CORNERSTONE WAS LAID FOR THE NEW FEDERAL BUILDING IN 1935. CONSTRUCTION WAS COMPLETED IN 1936, AND THE BUILDING OFFICIALLY OPENED IN 1937. AT THAT TIME, THE FIRST FLOOR AND BASEMENT WERE AIR-CONDITIONED, A NEW TECHNOLOGY THAT HAD NOT BEEN INSTALLED IN THE ANY OTHER POST OFFICE IN THE COUNTRY.

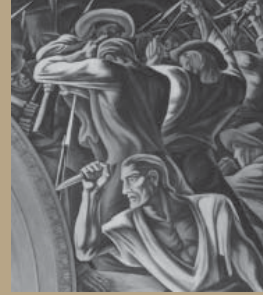
SHORTLY AFTER THE BUILDING'S COMPLETION, NOTED ARTIST HOWARD COOK PAINTED AN EPIC 16-PANEL FRESCO MURAL IN THE ENTRY LOBBY; IT IS REGARDED AS ONE OF THE SHOWPIECES OF THE FEDERAL MURAL PROGRAM. COOK WAS SELECTED FROM AMONG 185 ARTISTS IN A NATIONAL COMPETITION CONDUCTED BY THE TREASURY DEPARTMENT'S SECTION OF FINE ARTS. IN 1999, ART CONSERVATORS RESTORED THE MURAL TO ITS ORIGINAL BRILLIANCE.

THE U.S. POST OFFICE AND COURTHOUSE IS LOCATED IN THE ALAMO PLAZA HISTORIC DISTRICT. IN 2000, THE BUILDING WAS INDIVIDUALLY LISTED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES.

AN ARCHED NICHE FRAMES THE JUDGE'S BENCH IN THE CEREMONIAL COURTROOM.

ARCHITECTURE

A SKILLFUL EXAMPLE OF BEAUX-ARTS CLASSICISM, THE U.S. POST OFFICE AND COURTHOUSE IS INDICATIVE OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT'S GOAL OF EXPRESSING DEMOCRATIC IDEALS THROUGH CLASSICALLY DERIVED ARCHITECTURE FEATURING



GRAND SCALE, SYMMETRY, AND REFINED DETAILS. THE SIX-STORY BUILDING ENCOMPASSES AN ENTIRE CITY BLOCK AND IS CONSTRUCTED OF STEEL AND CONCRETE CLAD IN RICH LOCAL MATERIALS—TEXAS PINK GRANITE AND TEXAS CREAM LIMESTONE. THE BUILDING IS POLYGONAL IN PLAN, CENTERED ON

A CENTRAL LIGHT COURT. ITS FACADE (SOUTH ELEVATION) EMPHA-SIZES A CENTRALLY RECESSED PORCH BEHIND A SCREEN OF SIX MONUMENTAL IONIC COLUMNS, RISING TO SUPPORT AN ENTABLATURE THAT CONTINUES ALL AROUND THE BUILDING.

AT THE FIRST STORY, THE PRINCIPAL APPROACH IS CREATED BY BROAD STEPS OF TEXAS PINK GRANITE SPANNING THE WIDTH OF THE BUILDING, LEADING TO THREE ARCHED ENTRANCES WITH KEYSTONES, ALTERNATING WITH FOUR RECTANGULAR WINDOWS WITH DECORATIVE METAL GRILLES. LIMESTONE MASONRY WALLS ARE ARTICULATED BY CHAMFERED JOINTS, RISING TO AN OVERHANGING STRINGCOURSE. THE LIMESTONE WALLS OF THE UPPER STORIES ARE SMOOTH IN CONTRAST, BUT ARE ALSO DIVIDED INTO SEVEN BAYS, FEATURING RECTANGULAR WINDOWS AT THE SECOND STORY, AND ELONGATED FENESTRATION FORMED BY VERTICALLY STACKED WINDOWS AT THE THIRD AND FOURTH STORIES. ABOVE THE ENTABLATURE, THE ATTIC (SIXTH) STORY IS SIMILARLY CLAD IN SMOOTH LIMESTONE VENEER WITH RECTANGULAR FENESTRATION FLANKED BY FLAT PILASTERS. AT THE EDGE OF THE LOW-PITCHED MANSARD ROOF, SIX DECORATIVE STONE ACROTHERIA (URN-LIKE ORNAMENTS) ARE ALIGNED WITH THE PILASTERS AND COLUMNS BELOW.

ON THE INTERIOR, THE BEAUX-ARTS TRADITION OF GRAND ENTRANCES AND CIRCULATION AREAS IS BOLDLY EXPRESSED BY THE ENTRY AND POSTAL LOBBIES' RICH ARCHITECTURAL DETAIL



LEFT/INSET: DETAIL OF "SAN ANTONIO'S IMPORTANCE IN TEXAS HISTORY" BY HOWARD COOK.

ABOVE: CEREMONIAL THIRD-FLOOR COURTROOM.

LEFT: ENTRANCE LOBBY.

RIGHT/INSET: GLASS-TOPPED, BRONZE TABLES IN THE POSTAL LOBBY.



AND ORNAMENTATION. THE ENTRY LOBBY IS DISTINGUISHED BY A SERIES OF BRACKETED ENTRYWAYS CAPPED BY BLIND ARCHES WITH EGG-AND-DART MOLDINGS. LIGHT-COLORED ST. GENEVIEVE MARBLE COVERS THE WALLS UP TO THE SPRINGING COURSE. THE MOST VIBRANT FEATURE IS HOWARD COOK'S OUTSTANDING 16-PANEL MURAL, "SAN ANTONIO'S IMPORTANCE IN TEXAS HISTORY." THE MURAL IS A FRESCO, A TECHNIQUE OF PAINT APPLIED DIRECTLY OVER WET PLASTER, AND SPANS 750 SQUARE FEET, MAKING IT ONE OF THE LARGEST FRESCOES IN THE NATION. COOK'S MURAL EVOKES HISTORICAL EVENTS IN TEXAS, INCLUDING THE ARRIVAL OF THE FIRST CONQUISTADORS, THE SIGNING OF THE TEXAS DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE, AND THE ARRIVAL OF THE RAILROAD.



THE POSTAL LOBBY FEATURES ITS ORIGINAL BRONZE AND GLASS-TOPPED TABLES, WITH 41 BRONZE SALES WINDOW-BOXES CAPPED BY A CONTINUOUS BAND OF FRETWORK AND DIVIDED BY MARBLE DORIC PILASTERS THAT RISE TO A WIDE DENTILED CORNICE. THE FLOORS ARE TENNESSEE GOLDEN VEINED PINK MARBLE, WITH DARK CEDAR-COLORED MARBLE BASES, AND LIGHT-COLORED ST. GENEVIEVE MARBLE FOR THE WAINSCOT. ORIGINAL BRONZE LIGHT FIXTURES GRACE THE LOBBY IN A VARIETY OF DECORATIVE MOTIFS DEPICTING EAGLES AND SHIELDS.

THE CEREMONIAL COURTROOM, LOCATED IN THE SOUTH WING OF THE THIRD FLOOR, IS A LIGHT-FILLED TWO-STORY SPACE, FEATURING SIX BRONZE PENDANT CHANDELIERS AND DARK-STAINED WOOD FOR THE WAINSCOT AND ALL OF THE BUILT-IN FURNITURE, INCLUDING THE ORIGINAL JUDGE'S BENCH, WITNESS STAND AND CLERK'S DESK. TALL, PAINTED PILASTERS EXTEND FROM THE WAINSCOT TO A WIDE ORNAMENTAL PLASTER ENTABLATURE. THE JUDGE'S BENCH IS FRAMED BY AN ARCHED NICHE ENRICHED WITH WIDE, INTRICATELY DECORATED PLASTER ORNAMENT, MOLDINGS, AND GILDING, CONTRIBUTING TO THE IMPRESSIVE CHARACTER OF THE ROOM.

THE U.S. POST OFFICE AND COURTHOUSE RETAINS ITS CHARACTER-DEFINING DETAILS AND CRAFTSMANSHIP, AND CONTINUES TO CONVEY ITS SIGNIFICANCE AS AN EXCELLENT EXAMPLE OF A MONUMENTAL BEAUX-ARTS-STYLE PUBLIC BUILDING IN SAN ANTONIO.



BUILDING FACTS

ARCHITECT:
RALPH HAYWOOD
CAMERON AND
PAUL PHILIPPE CRET

CONSTRUCTION DATES:
1935-36

LANDMARK STATUS:
LISTED IN THE NATIONAL
REGISTER OF HISTORIC
PLACES
LOCATED IN THE ALAMO
PLAZA NATIONAL REGISTER
HISTORIC DISTRICT

LOCATION:
615 EAST
HOUSTON STREET

ARCHITECTURAL STYLE:
BEAUX-ARTS

PRIMARY MATERIALS:
TEXAS CREAM LIMESTONE,
TEXAS PINK GRANITE,
STEEL AND CONCRETE

PROMINENT FEATURES:
HOWARD COOK'S 16-PANEL
FRESCO MURAL
CEREMONIAL COURTROOM

LEFT/ABOVE:
DETAIL OF ARCHED
LOBBY DOORWAY
SURROUNDED BY
HOWARD COOK'S
MURAL.

LEFT:
THE MONUMENTAL
U.S. POST OFFICE
AND COURTHOUSE
FACES ALAMO PLAZA.



1932

CONGRESS APPROPRIATES FUNDS FOR THE U.S. POST OFFICE AND COURTHOUSE.

1935-36

THE BUILDING IS CONSTRUCTED.

1937

THE BUILDING IS CEREMONIALLY OPENED.

1937-39

HOWARD COOK DESIGNS AND EXECUTES THE FRESCO MURAL, "SAN ANTONIO'S IMPORTANCE IN TEXAS HISTORY."

1999

COOK'S MURAL IS RESTORED.

2000

THE BUILDING IS INDIVIDUALLY LISTED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES.