

HISTORIC PRESERVATION STUDY REPORT
MILWAUKEE FEDERAL BUILDING & U.S. COURTHOUSE
(Written in 1982)

I. NAME

Historic: Milwaukee Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse

Common: Same

II. LOCATION

515-519 East Wisconsin Avenue

Legal Property Description: Plat of Milwaukee in Sacs (28-29-33)-7-22 Block 23 all of SD
Balk 23

III. CLASSIFICATION

Building

IV. OWNER OF PROPERTY

United States Government
General Services Administration
515-519 East Wisconsin Avenue
Milwaukee, WI 53233

V. DESCRIPTION

The Milwaukee Federal Building is a massive structure fifteen bays wide, five stories high and covers an entire block on the east side of the central business district. A square tower raises four stories above the roofline from the center of the main block. Its fortress-like appearance is attributed to the design influence of the Richardsonian Romanesque; a later 19th century architectural style that was used widely in residential, commercial and public buildings. The style elongated the round Syrian arch and emphasized it by contrasting masonry over arches and other structural features. Windows were deeply recessed to stress weight and the overall form suggested a general largeness and simplicity in design. It was originally built as the United States Post Office, Courthouse and Custom House. While the main post office and customs department have moved to separate quarters, this building continues to serve the Federal District Court and among others the offices of the Internal Revenue Service and the General Services Administration.

The building is constructed of a steel skeleton and rests on a raised foundation of dark gray rock-faced granite laid in course ashlar. Above this the walls surfaced with light gray dressed granite also laid in coursed ashlar with the first floor banded in dressed and rock faced stone. The form of the Federal Building is a compact rectangle. The central pavilion is flanked by end pavilions and the entire composition is topped with a steeply pitched, intersecting gabled roof covered with slate. The tower is topped by a pyramidal shaped roof also covered with slate.

The facades, articulated by numerous openings on all floors, are symmetrically designed. The building is set in three stages with a base of horizontal stone in bands of smooth and rock-faced blocks and the upper two stages of smooth blocks. The three stages are separated by denticulated stone belt courses. The main façade on East Wisconsin Avenue is Palladian in form with a recessed center pavilion. At the entry is a massive arched portico of five round arches that spring from clustered columns. The capitals and spandrels of the portico are probably the finest examples of foliated carved stonework of the late 19th century extant in Milwaukee. This is testament to the excellence in craftsmanship that was employed throughout the construction of this building. The end pavilions are defined by engaged towers with conical roofs trimmed with copper finial caps. Above the third floor windows is a series of arches that spring from bas-relief pilasters. Along the fifth floor are four evenly spaced dormers framed with steeply pitched gables and battered piers. The east and west facades are identically designed with center gabled pavilions perpendicular to the main block. The massive central tower carries through the same design elements of the end pavilions with engaged towers at the corners and blind dormers in the roof. Below the roofline is an arcaded belfry.

With the review of historic photographs and building permits, the exterior of the Federal Building has remained virtually unchanged. The first five stories of the south wing were added in 1930 with the last two in 1940. It is a harmonious addition that blends well in terms of materials, design, height and bulk and does not affect the historic fabric of the original building. Two changes were the removal and the replacement of the gutters and the replacement of the front entry doors.

VI. HISTORY

For most of the nineteenth century, the presence of the federal government in Milwaukee was manifested only in a few small agencies such as the Customs Service and Post Office Department. Rented quarters at various locations were sufficient until the 1870s when the tremendous population explosion in the city necessitated larger facilities. In the 1880s the federal government embarked upon a nationwide program of constructing large buildings in major population centers to consolidate the federal courts, Post Office and Customs Service under one roof. In Milwaukee that program was manifested in the construction of the present Federal Building.

Milwaukee's Congressional delegation assured the erection of a substantial structure that would be a credit to the community, when it secured the passage of a bill appropriating \$1.4 million for the construction of the building. The present site was selected by a federal committee after an acrimonious debate over whether to locate the facility on the Juneautown or Kilbourntown sides of the Milwaukee River. In 1891, Supervising Architect of the Treasury Department, Willoughby J. Edbrooke, arrived in Milwaukee with the plans for the new structure. The design was based on famous nineteenth century architect Henry Hobson Richardson's scheme for the Allegheny County Courthouse in Pittsburgh, which had been built in 1883 and was widely emulated. Similar federal buildings were erected in St. Paul, Minnesota; Omaha, Nebraska; Washington, D.C. and other cities.

Construction spanned almost seven years. Repeatedly, Congress was forced to appropriate additional funding to continue the construction of the costly structure. When it was completed, the building compared favorably with similar structures throughout the United States in its size, fine materials and elaborate decoration.

Although its 125 rooms were more than ample to house the post office, the federal courts and the Customs Service in 1900, by the late 1920's the increase in the number of federal agencies with offices in Milwaukee mandated that the structure be enlarged to provide additional office space. Consequently, during 1929-1932 a large, five story addition was added to the rear of the main block. In the 1940s two more stories were added to the south wing. The additions were sensitively designed to harmonize with the original structure in materials and scale. The building continues to service its original purpose as a federal office building, although two of its original tenants, the Post Office and the Customs Service, have relocated to other buildings.

VII. SIGNIFICANCE

Date Built or Altered: 1892-1899

Builder/Architect: Willoughby J. Edbrooke, architect

The Federal Building was cited as significant as a well-executed example of Richardsonian Romanesque architecture, for its sustained use as a United States Courthouse and as the center of Milwaukee's federal government affairs. It was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1974, recorded for the Historic American Buildings Survey and named a Milwaukee Landmark in 1972.

VIII. STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends to the Historic Preservation Commission the designation of the Federal Building as an historic structure as defined in Section 2-335 of the Milwaukee Code of Ordinances.

Our recommendation is based on the previous recognition received by this building and in the areas of significance as enumerated above.

IX. PRESERVATION GUIDELINES

The following preservation guidelines represent the principle concerns of the Historic Preservation Commission regarding this historic designation. However, the Commission reserves the right to make final decisions based upon particular design submissions. These guidelines shall be applicable only to the Milwaukee Federal Building. Nothing in these guidelines shall be construed to prevent ordinary maintenance or restoration and/or replacement of documented original elements.

A. Roofs

The existing building height, rooflines, pitch, dormers, gables and finials shall not be changed or modified. Subject to approval of the Commission, dormers or solar collector panels may be added to the roof surfaces facing south if they do not visually intrude upon the east, west or north street elevations.

B. Openings

The location, style and material of window and door openings and the number and configuration of panes, shall be retained on the north, east and west street elevations, except that restoration to the documented original condition shall be permitted. Additional openings or changes in the size or configuration of existing openings shall not be permitted unless by the Historic Preservation Commission, except that restoration to the documented original condition shall be permitted. Approval for changes shall be based on the compatibility of the proposed changes with the style and period of the building.

C. Additions

No additions may be made to the east, west or north street elevations of the building. This includes skywalks or overhead passages used to connect the Federal Building to adjacent buildings. Further additions to the south elevation shall require the approval of the Commission. Approval shall be based upon the addition's design compatibility with the building in terms of height, roof configuration, fenestration, scale, design and materials and the degree to which it visually intrudes upon the existing east, west and north elevations.

D. Porches, Trim and Ornamentation

There shall be no changes to the existing porches, trim or ornamentation except as necessary to restore the building to its original condition. Replacement features shall match the original member in scale, design, color and material.

E. Materials

Unpainted brick and stone shall not be painted or covered. Any repairs including repointing of defective mortar shall match the original in color, style, texture and strength characteristics. Masonry shall be cleaned only when necessary to halt deterioration and with the gentlest method possible approved by the Commission. The slate roof and copper finials and trim shall be retained to the fullest extent possible. Replacement materials shall match the original in design, color and texture.

