

POST OFFICES IN A FOGGY WORLD

UNDERSTANDING THE VALUE OF THE NEW DEAL POST OFFICE AND ITS PUBLIC ART IN THE NATIONAL LANDSCAPE

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Cover Image:
The opening of the Beverly Hills Post Office, April 28, 1934.
Beverly Hills, California
Image Courtesy of Beverly Hills Heritage.

YESSIR. I'M A SUCKER FOR THIS COUNTRY.
I'M A SUCKER FOR THE STAR SPANGLED BANNER—AND I'M A SUCKER FOR THIS COUNTRY.
I LIKE WHAT WE GOT HERE! I LIKE IT!
A GUY CAN SAY WHAT HE WANTS—AND DO WHAT HE WANTS—
[...]
NOW, THAT'S ALL RIGHT, ISN'T IT?
ALL RIGHT. AND WE DON'T WANT ANYBODY COMING AROUND CHANGING IT, DO WE?
NO, SIR. AND WHEN THEY DO I GET MAD! I GET B-BOILING MAD. AND RIGHT NOW, JOHN, I'M SIZZLING!
I GET MAD FOR A LOT OF OTHER GUYS BESIDES MYSELF—
I GET MAD FOR A GUY NAMED WASHINGTON! AND A GUY NAMED JEFFERSON—AND LINCOLN.

LIGHTHOUSES, JOHN!
LIGHTHOUSES IN A FOGGY WORLD!

YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN?

HENRY CONNELL IN *MEET JOHN DOE* (1941),
DIRECTED AND PRODUCED BY FRANK CAPRA

The seemingly hardboiled newspaper editor Henry Connell, calls on the larger than life figures of the founding fathers to impress upon the protagonist 'John Doe' the importance of standing up for an ideal and a national identity. Connell describes these men as beacons of hope and stability in a moment of darkness. Although couched in metaphor, Connell is truly asking whether John Doe will become a lighthouse, or merely dissolve into the fog, lost to history.

Like Connell's lighthouses, the New Deal era post offices were intended to act as symbolic beacons of hope, stability, and guidance during the crisis of the Great Depression. Today, with the recent threats to their future, Connell's question to John Doe may more appropriately be posed to the nation, how will we treat these resources? Will they remain strong symbols of national identity? Or fade into the fog of history?

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ABSTRACT

The one thousand New Deal era post offices with interior art (commissioned under the Treasury Department's Section of Fine Arts) that are spread throughout the nation, are representative not only of architectural norms of the era but of social values. These resources are defined by a unique relationship between art, architecture, and community that demonstrate a concern for regional identity, state a belief in equal access, assert that citizens are entitled to aesthetically beautiful environments and cultural experiences, and stand as crucial remnants of an exceptional moment in American history. Yet today, recent divestments of post offices by the United States Postal Service (USPS) have cast doubt on the future of a number of these significant historic resources. Although the speed of divestments is largely in keeping with historic trends, recent perceptions of a heightened threat (particularly due to the concentration of sales in California) has initiated a broad discussion around the ways in which properties are sold and reused. As the USPS continues to downsize, and with the innovations in technology that are driving mail services into the digital realm, the vast majority of the USPS's purpose-built properties will no longer have a future as post offices. Instead, these structures, if they are to remain a part of the nation's built heritage, must find new uses. Through examining the historical moment in which these structures were created, the policy issues and procedures of contemporary divestment processes, and the methods employed to reuse previously divested post offices, this thesis codifies the significance of these structures, and provides recommendations for the successful reuse and reintegration of historic post offices from the 1930s, with interior Section artwork, in the national landscape.

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INTRODUCTION

OUR FUTURE BELONGS TO US AMERICANS.
IT IS FOR US TO DESIGN IT; FOR US TO BUILD IT.
IN THAT BUILDING WE SHALL PROVE THAT OUR FAITH IS STRONG ENOUGH
TO SURVIVE THE MORE FEARSOME STORMS THAT HAVE EVER SWEEPED OVER THE EARTH.
IN THE DAYS AND MONTHS AND YEARS TO COME, WE SHALL BE MAKING HISTORY —
HEWING OUT A NEW SHAPE FOR THE FUTURE. AND WE SHALL MAKE
VERY SURE THAT THAT FUTURE OF OURS BEARS THE LIKENESS OF LIBERTY.
ALWAYS THE HEART AND SOUL OF OUR COUNTRY
WILL BE THE HEART AND SOUL OF THE COMMON MAN.

PRESIDENT FRANKLIN DELANO ROOSEVELT, 1940

Problem Statement

The one thousand New Deal era post offices with interior art that are spread throughout the nation, demonstrate a concern for regional identity, state a belief in equal access, assert that citizens are entitled to aesthetically beautiful environments and cultural experiences, and stand as crucial remnants of an exceptional moment in American history. Yet today, recent divestments of post offices by the United States Postal Service (USPS) have cast doubt on the future of a number of these significant historic resources. Although the speed of divestments is largely in keeping with historic trends, recent perceptions of a heightened threat (particularly due to the concentration of sales in California) has initiated a broad discussion around the ways in which properties are sold and reused. As the USPS continues to downsize, and with the innovations in technology that are driving mail services into the digital realm, the vast majority of the USPS's purpose-built properties will no longer have a future as post offices. Instead, these structures, if they are to remain a part of the nation's built heritage, must find new uses.

The post offices of the New Deal era, which represent the important building programs of the Great Depression, are of particular interest for divestment conversations as they are representative not only of architectural norms of the era but of social values. The vast majority, 1,000 out of 1,400 of these 1930s post offices, contain significant art objects (primarily murals and sculptures) commissioned under the Section of Fine Arts (referred to as 'the Section'). Due to the Section's focus on regional identity and local involvement, these works are tied to place and created for the structures which house them, creating a relationship between art, architecture, and community that becomes threatened when these resources are faced with divestment. This thesis grapples with this relationship, codifying the importance of these structures, examining methods employed to reuse previously divested post offices, and providing recommendations for the successful reuse and reintegration of historic post offices in the national landscape.

Scope

Over 1,400 New Deal post offices were constructed by the federal building programs from 1933 to 1943, making them more numerous than schools built (1,200) or infrastructure projects of roads, bridges, and tunnels (numbering 1,200 projects all together). In merely a decade, three times the number of post offices were built than had been created over the previous fifty years. Even more importantly, post offices were spread homogeneously across the nation; every state received its share, as well as all United States protectorates and territories (which included Alaska and Hawaii). Taken as a national type, these resources are representative of a significant moment in United States history when the nation grappled with the Great Depression and the federal government embarked on a mission to provide jobs, while simultaneously maintaining the American spirit, ensuring social cohesion in a time of adversity, and allowing American culture to flourish. Yet, the New Deal post office is not merely a symbol of the federal ideology of the 1930s, but is also hyper-local; architecture is reflective of local styles and materials, artwork often depicts local scenes, and local citizens were involved in the creation and embellishment of the buildings. These structures, cre-

ated by the federal government, to serve the local community, were intended as permanent additions to the nation, serving the people in perpetuity.

Interpreting the role of these structures for the future is complicated by these historical issues. How can a building be integrated into a community in a new way that can touch on the resource's importance as federal infrastructure, as a source of local identity, as a "democratic art gallery," and as a public meeting ground when these post offices are generally sold to private interests?¹ It is through exploring the intersection of these values and understanding the ideological framework of their creation that helps to clarify when these resources should be reintegrated into the community and how best to effect this future.

Even within the New Deal era post office type, there are distinct divisions. This work focuses on New Deal era post offices with interior art commissioned by the Section, as this subset demonstrates the intersection of federal and local interests, and the presence of interior artwork establishes an argument for the original intention of continued public access. This issue of public accessibility to works of art complicates the future of these structures as continuing public access may become a problem during and after divestment. Most historic post offices built prior to 1934 do not have interior art, as the addition of artwork was a product of the New Deal ideology and programming; therefore, historic post offices usually do not need to solve issues of interior access, making the post office type under discussion in this work unusual.

Additionally, limiting post offices to those with artwork by the Section, instead of including those with art funded by other relief projects (like the Treasury Relief Art Project, or TRAP), helps to remove some of the largest and grandest post offices, like the Bronx General Post Office in New York City (with its well-known murals by Ben Shahn and Bernarda Bryson), that are located in areas with a long history of federal buildings and are more heavily influenced by the dynamic real estate markets seen in dense urban areas today.² The Section's broad programmatic approach to reaching smaller communities and creating cultural opportunities, offers a unique value that provides a wealth of interpretive opportunities on the local and federal scale.

Methodology

The material gathered to address the questions above consisted of research into a number of primary and secondary sources, conversations with relevant individuals, and a review of the current policies and procedures around the divestment process.

¹ Marlene Park and Gerald E. Markowitz, *Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 8.

² The Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP) was created after the Section and was a true relief program. Artists were selected to participate in TRAP projects based primarily on their need, and as funding was provided specifically for artwork (unlike the Section which relied on extra, unused funding within a building's construction budget) the murals and sculpture created by TRAP were generally more numerous per project and covered much more of a post office's lobby than the one or two murals created under the Section for each building. Often, a project would start with a single mural provided by the Section, and would then be expanded with additional TRAP funding to provide a comprehensive art program for the interior.

The literature review sought to define the contemporary dialogue around these resources; examining the academic publications that generally focused on artwork over architecture, resources on the history of the postal service and its recent issues, general policy documents that outlined divestment procedures, and sources that examined community voice and presence in recent controversies. The literature review is summarized in *Chapter 1: Defining the Conversation*, and most importantly determines that many of the issues considered within this work are not analyzed in any other publication. Discussions around the New Deal post offices generally summarize the issues at hand, but do not fully address the context of the buildings' creation, their role within the history of the nation's postal service, or fully explore the role of the building's program instead of merely its function. Additionally, while much discussion has revolved around the successes and failures of reuse projects for recently divested buildings, little has been done to explore how these buildings have been reused when divested in the recent past, a primary aim of this thesis.

As part of the larger research that went into shaping and directing the narrative of this work, visiting the National Archives at College Park, Maryland was essential to understand the process by which these resources were created. Much of the pertinent information is contained within Record Group 121 "Records of the Public Buildings Service," and working with these resources was crucial to understanding the rhetoric, dialogue, aspirations, and results of the Treasury Department's building program and the Section.

After completing the bulk of the research, conversations with relevant professionals, community members, and advocates helped to shed light on some of the more complex issues around divestment and reuse that are currently under discussion and define the situation that these resources face. Talking to individuals within the USPS system, as well as advocates and community members who are responding to USPS policies, allowed for a more complete and nuanced discussion of the issues confronted and the procedures followed during the divestment process (*Chapter 2. Rightsizing the Postal Service*).

In order to define the resource of the New Deal era post office that holds Section artwork, the institutional context, historical framework, and genesis moment of the New Deal are discussed (*Chapters 3 through 5*). In Chapter 6, *Illustrating Life after Divestment*, a number of case studies are examined that illustrate the values, opinions, and realities of local communities that have experienced a number of reuse opportunities, demonstrating the diversity of options available and how varying levels of community involvement or private development create different results. These varying results have the potential to be applied to future divestments or are demonstrative of undesirable outcomes. It was this discussion of potential reuse options – which demonstrated the varying degrees of collaboration and communication between community, municipal, organizational, and federal interests – that helped to define a number of conditions and themes that would lead to the most sympathetic treatment of these historic resources (*Chapter 7, Characteristic Themes*). The resulting recommendations are summarized in Chapter 8, *Recommendations*, which includes additional comments regarding future steps that can improve the conditions facing these historic resources.

Assumptions

Coming from an academic institution with a strong historic preservation perspective, this work is influenced by an interest in and appreciation for built fabric that prioritizes the historic values of older buildings as a means to interpret and understand the history of a community, a city, or a nation. The research questions outlined in the problem statement above were not designed to unequivocally result in a preference for preservation, yet the research process was influenced by a basic assumption that historic resources have an inherent value to the community; making them worthy of further discussions around significance, future reuse, and community preference. In addition, the prioritization by many communities in increasing the recognition of these historic structures during the divestment process was an early indicator of the belief by a large segment of the community that these structures possessed an enduring legacy that could be benefited by sensitive reuse proposals.

Limitations

Due to an effort in this thesis to create a broad understanding of the impact of divestment, one limitation in the research is that no individual divestment case has been examined closely enough to poll involved parties, to collect data on the effectiveness of community involvement, or to examine the interaction between interested parties first-hand. While newspapers, blogs, social media platforms, and photographs helped to express community concerns and thoughts, this body of information is incomplete and not representative of the complete community. However, due to the information available through these platforms, it was possible to gather some information on local level politics and perspectives. Having the time and access to complete in depth field work around a divestment case is one area that holds potential for further study, and provided with more time, further involvement with one or two contemporary divestment proceedings would allow for additional recommendations for best practices in community involvement.

Additionally, one area in need of improvement is the availability of data from the USPS itself. As the agency in charge of divestment procedures and as a steward of historic properties, the USPS should be able to provide better data on the rate of its closures, sales, and relocations. In the absence of adequate data, tracking the results of closures and whether historic resources have been effectively reused, sympathetically treated, or truly preserved becomes a difficult issue to contend with.

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CHAPTER 1

DEFINING THE CONVERSATION: LITERATURE REVIEW

I LIKEN IT TO COMING ACROSS A RUIN IN A JUNGLE AND STARTING TO DIG
AND YOU FIND IT'S NOT ONLY A BUILDING,
IT'S A CITY,
AND THEN YOU FIND IT'S AN ENTIRE CIVILIZATION THAT'S BEEN BURIED AND FORGOTTEN.
[...] IN THIS CASE IT'S OUR CIVILIZATION, IT'S SOMETHING THAT WE DID.

GRAY BRECHIN, *THE LIVING NEW DEAL*, 2008

Much of the literature on the New Deal era post office can be divided into three categories: sources on architecture, sources on the art of the Section and other art projects, and recent coverage of the closure and divestment of a number of the New Deal era post offices. While these sources are essential in examining the representative parts of the issues facing these historic post offices today, none of these sources attempt to approach the buildings and their interior art as single, cohesive objects, in order to assess the values that these buildings express as community spaces, government-built structures, and expressions of democratic values.

Renewed Interest in the Art of the New Deal

The 1970s, thirty years after the New Deal, marked the first time that the New Deal was approached as an academic topic that had become a part of the recent past. Francis O'Connor's *The New Deal Art Projects: An Anthology of Memoirs* (1972), is regarded as the first critical work in initiating a discourse on the role of federal art projects of the 1930s.¹ By talking with key participants – both artists and administrators – who could critically discuss their memories while providing primary source support, O'Connor sought to start the greater conversation about the effect of federally funded arts programming in America.

Following this trigger, an exhibit and accompanying catalogue by Marlene Park and Gerald Markowitz in 1977, focused on New Deal art projects in New York State.² This publication offered a look at the evolution of all federal arts programs and divided the artwork by the building typology it was created for (i.e. schools, post offices, libraries, etc.). Park and Markowitz's simple division of building typologies began to explore the differences between the programs, but due to its intent as an exhibition catalogue, focused more broadly on introducing the first critical examination of New Deal art as a body of work.

By 1984, Park and Markowitz had expanded upon the scope of their exhibition catalogue in *Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal*.³ This more comprehensive approach to understanding the processes, the results, and the ideologies of the federal arts programs connected the artifacts left by the 1930s in the form of buildings and art objects to a larger culture of articulating American beliefs and histories. The use of the comprehensive records left by the administrators of and artists employed by the federal arts programs allows this volume to demonstrate the institutional awareness of an ideological framework and a concern with quality of output.

A slight predecessor of *Democratic Vistas*, the 1982 *Wall to Wall America*, by Karal Ann Marling, has a similar reliance on the rich records housed by the National Archives.⁴ In presenting each chapter as a series of vignettes that support a larger theme on the creation of public art, Marling uses correspondence

1 Francis O'Connor, *The New Deal Arts Projects: An Anthology of Memoirs*, (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1972).

2 Marlene Park and Gerald Markowitz, *New Deal For Art: The Government Art Projects of the 1930s with Examples from New York City and State*, (Hamilton, New York: Gallery Association of New York State, 1977).

3 Marlene Park and Gerald E Markowitz, *Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984).

4 Karal Ann Marling, *Wall to Wall America: Post Office Murals in the Great Depression*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

between the Section administrators, the artists, the local postmasters, and members of the community to depict the acceptance, rejection, conflict, and dialogues that surrounded the Section activities in towns across America. *Wall to Wall America* provides a rich and dramatic narrative of the battles fought between the various parties, all in the pursuit of quality public art, however, the focus is very clearly on the artwork, with the building serving only as a container for the murals and sculptures inside.

While interest in the New Deal experienced a healthy revival in the 1970s and 1980s, the dialogue appears to have come to a standstill in the decades since. Often the artwork and the stories of the artists take center stage, referencing the individual works for their value as art pieces, not for the qualities that they express as objects integrated into a larger work and intended to remain part of a national corpus. Although the publications discussed above are important in initiating discussions of values and historical continuity, the focus is largely on the way in which artistic style can be interpreted as part of a larger movement of abstraction, or how the ways in which artists organized tied into the larger framework of unionization sweeping twentieth-century America.

Architecture, Authorship, and the Office of the Supervising Architect

The architectural commentary on historic post offices focuses on the New Deal era as part of the continuum of American architecture. While it very much fits within this discussion, little work has been undertaken to look more deeply at the ideological issues that may be expressed within the architectural articulation of the national building program; a topic that, as discussed above, receives wide coverage when discussing the artwork of the era.

The best published source on the development of New Deal post office architecture is contained in *Architects to the Nation: The Rise and Decline of the Supervising Architect's Office* (2000), by Antoinette J. Lee.⁵ Although Lee's book provides a detailed and comprehensive history of the changes in ideology and style within the Office of the Supervising Architect since its foundation, it is most focused with the issues of administrative control and authorship. This is particularly true of the era of interest here, due to the fact that the Office of Supervising Architect was removed from the Treasury Department in the early 1940s, effectively ending the historical role that is focused on by Lee. Some issues, such as regionalism, are touched on briefly and provide an interesting perspective when compared to the discussions regarding regionalism in the arts. However, it remains difficult to make more than generalized comparisons due to the significant difference in perspective expressed in architectural sources and art history or curatorial sources.

Additional resources, which relate to topics that predate the New Deal but provide important context on the history of the Office of the Supervising Architect of the Treasury Department, can be found in the 1923 volume, *The Office of the Supervising Architect: Its History, Activities, and Organization*, which gives an in depth history of the legal framework of the office, and sections of *Edward T. and William A. Potter:*

⁵ Antoinette J. Lee, *Architects to the Nation: the Rise and Decline of the Supervising Architect's Office*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

American Victorian Architects, by Sarah Bradford Landau, which discusses some of the early controversies in the office regarding the quality and expense of federal and private architects.⁶

Another rich source on some of the architectural trends of the era can be found in the multiple property documentation forms for the National Register of Historic Places. As nominations are prepared on a state-by-state basis and at varying levels of detail, some provide thorough information on the Section projects within their state, outlining the context, location, and number of buildings at the time of documentation.⁷ These listings also offer an important source from which it would be possible to begin to monitor where significant losses have occurred, or if specific buildings have gained particular importance. It must be noted however, that some states discuss only the New Deal era post offices in their documentation forms, but other states discuss the history of the post office more generally and include extant structures from all periods of the state's postal system development. While this latter approach is valuable in regards to the National Register criteria of expressing broad patterns of history, it results in a less robust discussion of the values and issues that are of interest here.

Community and Policy: Increasing Opposition

The revival of interest in post offices as the architectural centers of community, with social and architectural values seen beyond the artistic merits of any murals or decorative elements contained within, has most significantly occurred with the threat of change and closure. Although the closure of many historic post offices, and the threatened closure of many more, is a complicated topic that will be discussed more fully in a later section, the rhetoric of recent articles and publications has renewed discussions around the importance of a holistic approach to understanding these historic structures as architectural, artistic, symbolic, economic, cultural, and social resources.

The Advisory Council on Historic Preservation's (ACHP) 2014 publication *Preserving Historic Post Offices: A Report to Congress*, highlights the need to protect these resources, but focuses more fully on process considerations than on the reasons why these structures are valued parts of communities.⁸ Additionally, like Lee's work, the ACHP is concerned with the loss of any historic post offices, not specifically those of the 1930s. However, it is significant that this report does an effective job at highlighting the values of 1930s post offices as the best known federal works projects in communities across America.

6 Darrell Hevenor Smith, *The Office of the Supervising Architect: Its History, Activities, and Organization*, (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Press, 1923).; Sarah Bradford Landau, *Edward T. and William A. Potter: American Victorian Architects*, (New York: Garland, 1979).

7 States with Multiple Property Documentation Forms include nineteen states: Arkansas, Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Kansas, Mississippi, Montana, North Dakota, Nebraska, Nevada, New Mexico, New York, Oklahoma, Oregon, Utah, Washington, Wisconsin, and Wyoming. Many of the forms contain information for different periods of significance, and therefore some are more applicable to the time period under discussion here. Arkansas is particularly helpful regarding the artwork of the Section, while some states like Mississippi have in-depth inventory information on each individual property and examine those properties both as individual resources, as well as a collectively significant thematic group.

8 United States Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, *Preserving Historic Post Offices: A Report to Congress*, (Washington, D.C.: Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, 2014).

A thesis from 2014, by Widney Pierson at the Corcoran College of Art & Design, “Enriching Communities through the Reuse of Dismantled United States Post Office Sites,” began to grapple with the issues of embodied values of Section-built, now divested, post office structures as a design challenge.⁹ While Pierson looked for uses that could express similar community goals and create interactive spaces, the thesis looked at only one case and did little to engage with the larger body of New Deal post offices.

Conclusion

The current literature discussed above is an important starting point, however, the New Deal era post office does not yet possess a narrative that fully discusses the role of this typology on the landscape, accounting for values expressed, ideological perspectives, or the fusion between the architecture of the exterior and the artwork of the interior. In discussing these structures as merely the container or the contained, the actual role of these edifices as active places of community and discourse is lost. By stitching these narratives together more cohesively, one can begin to argue for the unique qualities that New Deal era post offices bring to the national landscape.

⁹ Widney Pierson, “Enriching Communities through the Reuse of Dismantled United States Post Office Sites,” ProQuest, ID: 1539525003, (Masters thesis, Corcoran College of Art & Design, 2014).

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CHAPTER 2

RIGHTSIZING THE POSTAL SERVICE: ANTITHETICAL TO PRESERVATION?

IF YOU THINK OF THE POST OFFICES AS SOMETHING LIKE A PUBLIC PARK,
THE PUBLIC OWNS THOSE PARKS. IT'S AKIN TO SELLING THE PARKS AND
TURNING THEM INTO GOLF COURSES.

STEVE HUTKINS, *SAVE THE POST OFFICE*, 2015

In 2009, the United States Postal Service announced the beginning of a study of 3,100 retail locations for possible closure.¹ Of the 3,100 to be studied, USPS officials hoped to cull 300 underutilized locations, primarily in cities with too many concentrated post offices.² This first round of closures met with mixed results. In some instances congressional representatives supported the USPS's need to reorganize, while others were highly critical. In New York City, a number of targeted branches, including Pitt Station on the Lower East Side, the West Village Station in Greenwich Village, and the Port Authority Station in Midtown, were retained through quick community responses and, in the case of Pitt Station, strong lobbying from State Assemblyman Sheldon Silver and Congresswoman Carolyn Maloney.³ These stations are not representative of the time period or values that this thesis addresses, but were heavily used urban post offices that proved impossible to close. This type of proposal from the USPS created early distrust of the postal service's actions.

Although the USPS has had limited success closing locations in dense urban areas, in New York City at least, the sale of these structures' air rights has proved to be financially beneficial. As early as 2005, the postal service was able to sell air rights from the Cooper Station (93 Fourth Avenue, Greenwich Village) and the Times Square (340 West 42nd Street) post offices.⁴ Thereby achieving the monetary return originally pursued through outright sale, but without the allegations of unfair closure that would have resulted from the sale of the building.

On July 26th 2011, the United States Postal Service announced that in its continuing effort to "rightsized," an additional 3,700 retail locations would be reviewed for closure.⁵ This process was expected to include 265 post offices already under review, but would add a substantial number to the list of pending closures. Unlike the 2009 announcement, little to no criteria for closures was provided to the public, and the response was instantly more critical. Postmaster General Patrick Donahoe cited recent revenue losses, an increasing reliance on digital platforms, and a need to change the way that the United States Postal Service did business, focusing on the need for closure without providing the metrics for how these closures would be determined. Donahoe closed his statement with a promise that "The Postal Service of the future will be

1 Phillip Read, "U.S. Postal Service Officials say 300 Outlets Closures Nationwide Likely," *New Jersey Online*. (June 15, 2009), http://www.nj.com/news/index.ssf/2009/06/us_postal_service_officials_sa.html

2 Ibid.

3 Lincoln Anderson, "Politicians Deliver: Post Offices Won't be Closed." *The Villager (online)* v. 79, n. 25 (November-December 2009), http://thevillager.com/villager_343/politiciansdeliver.html

4 John Freeman Gill, "Uncle Sam Sells Air Rights, and Preservationists Cringe." *New York Times*. (August 7, 2005), <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/07/nyregion/thecity/uncle-sam-sells-air-rights-and-preservationists-criinge.html>.; Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation. *Re: Sale of Development Rights at Cooper, Times Square and other stations*, (letter to the Postmaster General), (October 7, 2005), <http://www.gvshp.org/documents/USPSreview10-7.pdf>.

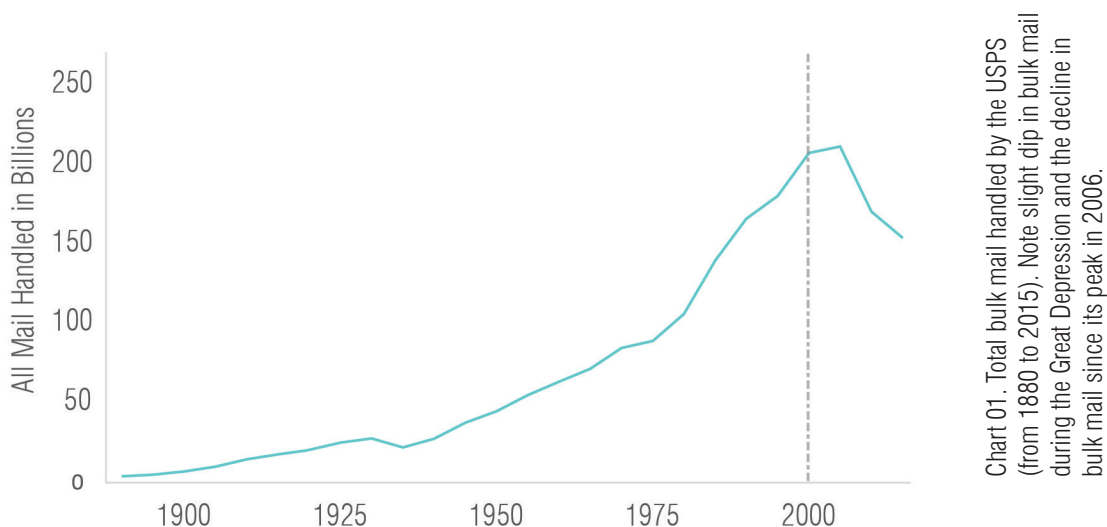
5 According to Merriam-Webster, 'rightsized' is defined as "to undergo a reduction to an optimal size" and was popularized in the 1990s and 2000s. However, "rightsized" has been used as jargon in discussions around the rightsizing of both corporations and cities. While in the corporate world, rightsizing is often synonymous with layoffs, rightsizing in an urban planning context is quite different. The Preservation Rightsizing Network describes this process as "reshaping the physical fabric of a city to meet the needs of its current and anticipated populations." This approach is in line with a re-thinking of services, needs, and strategies, which is similar to the connotation employed by the USPS in discussions around the rightsizing of its agency structure.; Preservation Rightsizing Network, "Mission and Goals," www.rightsizeplace.org/about/mission-and-goals/.; Eyder Peralta. "Is Your Post Office Closing?" *National Public Radio*. (July 26, 2011). <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2011/07/26/138706193/is-your-post-office-closing-usps-is-studying-shuttering-3-700-locations>

smaller, leaner and more competitive and it will continue to drive commerce, serve communities, and deliver value.”⁶ This promise highlights the changes that the USPS knows it is facing, and while the USPS is still determining the direction of its future, recent closures make it apparent that the stand-alone post office is becoming a feature of the agency’s past.

While the above numbers represent significant closures and downsizing from the postal service’s 35,520 locations nationwide, including nearly 27,000 post offices, the threat was more pronounced for the 8,500 properties that are owned outright by the USPS, as the sale of these properties could create a greater revenue return than the elimination of leased spaces.⁷ Additionally, the net financial benefit in selling USPS-owned properties heightens the risks to historic properties that number around 2,500 structures, or 29.4% of all postal service properties.⁸

Underlying Issues

With over 213 billion pieces of mail processed in 2006, the United States Postal Service reached its peak mail volume. In the ten years since, volume has plummeted to a level comparable to that of 1987; this represents the first instance of prolonged declining volume since the Great Depression [Chart 01].⁹



⁶ “Postal Service Takes Next Step in Optimizing Retail Network.” Release Number: pr11-089, *United States Postal Service: Postal News*. (July 26, 2011) http://about.usps.com/news/national-releases/2011/pr11_089.htm.

⁷ The reason for the substantial difference between the 35,520 locations and the 27,000 post offices is due to the fact that USPS locations consist of a number of different types, including USPS-run counters within other businesses, sorting facilities without retail desks, and post offices.; “A Decade of Facts and Figures,” *United States Postal Service*, (Fiscal Year 2015), <https://about.usps.com/who-we-are/postal-facts/decade-of-facts-and-figures.htm>

⁸ While the USPS operates over 35,000 retail locations (including postal desks and stand-alone post offices), only about 8,500 properties are owned by the agency. Of these, rough numbers indicate that 2,500 post office properties are historic (over fifty years old, and therefore eligible to be considered for the National Register of Historic Places). Of the historic properties, about 1,000 are New Deal era post offices with interior artwork. Therefore, 40% of the USPS’s historic properties are of the typology discussed by this thesis, or 11.7% of all of the USPS-owned properties.

⁹ United States Postal Service, “Pieces of Mail Handled, Number of Post Offices, Income and Expenses Since 1789,” (Data Source: *Annual Report of the Postmaster General*), (February 2016) <http://about.usps.com/who-we-are/postal-history/pieces-of-mail-since-1789.pdf>

In particular, the USPS has seen dropping volume in first-class mail, which is the most lucrative of its products and a staple of its revenue. The recession in 2008 continued to harm the agency's financial situation, which when coupled with the requirement by Congress to pre-pay retiree health benefits with \$5.5 billion dollar payments from 2006 through 2016, created conditions that have compounded the loss of mail volume. Large payments towards the Retiree Health Benefits Fund (RHBF) have limited the agency's liquidity, and have often defined the line between positive returns and net losses.¹⁰

Although downsizing postal service holdings has been highly controversial over the last six years, this is not an unusual action for the USPS. According to the *Save the Post Office* blog, which has attempted to track closures and sales, the postal service appears to have divested about 230 post offices built prior to 1971 over the last 40 years.¹¹ These numbers were arrived at through an examination of the number of facilities transferred from GSA to the USPS on its creation as an independent agency in 1971 (2,781 properties), and the number that the agency retained in Fiscal Year 2013 (2,550 properties).¹² Based off these rough numbers, and in the absence of additional data from the postal service, the site's primary author Steve Hutkins estimates that on average, six historic post offices have been sold a year since the early 1970s.

As divestments are therefore not unusual, it is the fact that the current speed of the divestment process results in cutting corners on proper policy and procedures that has created backlash from local communities. In addition, the postal service's policy of targeting properties in dynamic real estate markets to ensure a high rate of return on its investments, has caused many to fear that the USPS is more concerned with the market value of its properties and has not properly thought through the legacy of these structures, their role within local communities, and the responsibility of stewardship that the postal service is legally required to maintain.¹³ The retention of the world's largest commercial real estate services firm, CBRE Group, Inc., which receives a commission of two to six percent on all properties sold, has only added to the perception of the USPS's disregard for the non-monetary value of its real estate portfolio.

The relationship between CBRE and the USPS has come under fire from a variety of sources. In the popular media, the fact that the chairman of CBRE's board of directors, Richard Blum, is married to California Senator Dianne Feinstein has raised questions around whether CBRE was awarded the contract due to its political connections. In addition, the fact that California has seen one of the highest divestment rates for post offices in the nation, has further effected the perception of dirty dealings between Feinstein, Blum, and the USPS, however, no evidence of this has been produced.¹⁴ The USPS Office of the Inspector General

10 Daniel F. Richardson, "The U.S. Postal Service's Financial Condition: A Primer." *Congressional Research Service*. (September 22, 2014), 8.

11 *Save the Post Office* blog was started in response to the threatened closure of founder Steve Hutkins' local town post office in early 2011. It has since grown into a platform to track proposed closures, sales, and community actions. In addition, the site provides relevant literature and posts updates that interpret the basic numbers supplied by the USPS.; "Legacy at Risk: the OIG Audits the Postal Service's disposal of historic properties," *Save the Post Office* (blog), see subheading 'The Numbers', (July 18, 2013), <http://www.savethepostoffice.com/oig-audits-postal-services-disposal-historic-properties>.

12 Data from FY 2014 did not determine the breakdown of properties between those acquired from GSA in 1971 and those built or purchased since. In addition, data for FY 2015 is not yet available.

13 United States Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, *Preserving Historic Post Offices*, 21.

14 Madeleine Stevens, "Senator Feinstein's Husband & the Postal Service," *FactCheck.org*, (June 20, 2013), <http://www>.

(OIG) has also raised issues around the conflict of interest inherent in the exclusive contract between CBRE and the USPS.¹⁵ Due to the fact that CBRE is the sole company involved in the assessing of USPS property, the listing of that property, and in the negotiation where CBRE represents both buyer and seller, the OIG believes that there is a conflict of interest that “could lead to financial loss to the Postal Service and decrease public trust in the Postal Service’s brand.”¹⁶

Although on average six pre-1971 properties a year have been divested annually, in thirty-three months (from October 2010 to June 2013) the postal service sold twenty-two historic properties. While this averages from seven to eight historic properties sold every twelve months, the additional context that twenty-five properties were listed for sale and twenty-eight were under consideration for sale by July of 2013 makes this increase even more substantial.¹⁷ Since 2013, little information on the number of post offices divested annually has been made available to the public. The lack of available, reliable information makes it difficult to determine the extent to which the divestment pattern has increased or decreased over the last three years. In addition, many of the lists of sold properties have been created by individuals like Steve Hutkins, or have been crowd-sourced, and in either case, known divestments usually lack dates of sale, making them difficult to analyze chronologically.

While it would be easy to conflate age and value for the sake of simplicity, it is more accurate to acknowledge that not all post offices are necessarily historically significant or retain their integrity. However, the fact that the USPS has traditionally been lax in nominating National Register eligible properties and, therefore, many historic properties in its portfolio are not listed on the National Register of Historic Places, makes one more cautious in trusting that older properties have been adequately reviewed and assessed prior to any action being undertaken.

Additionally, with the recent sales reflecting an increase in private sector purchases, many communities are concerned that sales mean a net loss to the community. Many previous divestments, from the 1970s to the 1990s, also resulted in private sector adaptive reuse projects, however a large number appear to have been repurposed by municipal governments, or taken over by heritage organizations. Now, with the USPS’s concern over increasing liquidity and ensuring a high return on investments, the preference to sell to the highest bidder often results in the removal of these buildings from the public sphere, which they were intended to serve in perpetuity.

factcheck.org/2013/06/sen-feinsteins-husband-the-postal-service/

15 Lee Romney, “Inspector General Questions Postal Service Property Sales, Leases,” *Los Angeles Times*, (February 20, 2014), <http://articles.latimes.com/2014/feb/20/local/la-me-ln-usps-inspector-general-20140220>

16 Michael Magalski, “Memorandum Re: Management Alert – Risks Associated with CB Richard Ellis, Inc. Contract.” *Office of the Inspector General for the United States Postal Service*. (February 12, 2014), <https://www.uspsoig.gov/sites/default/files/document-library-files/2015/sm-ma-14-003.pdf>, 2.

17 Office of the Inspector General, United States Postal Service. *Preservation and Disposal of Historic Properties*, Audit Report, Report Number SM-AR-14-004, (April 16, 2014), 13.

Policy: Safeguards Circumvented

While the closure of post offices – particularly those that are relied upon by small and remote communities – is a sensitive topic, the fact that the USPS has failed to follow the established closure procedures has resulted in much bad press for the agency. This is of particular cause for concern when the downsizing of the USPS real estate portfolio threatens historic structures that make up the 29.4% of properties owned, of which 40% are New Deal era buildings containing public art. The following is a quick overview of the processes that are supposed to be triggered to ensure a proper divestment procedure is being followed.

Closures: In order to close a post office, a number of factors must be considered, including effects on the community, effects on employees, potential changes to service obligations, and financial considerations.¹⁸ Intended closures must then be announced sixty days prior to any action being undertaken, allowing time to effectively notify the community, allow for public comment, and in the case of strong opposition, to allow the community to petition the Postal Regulatory Commission (PRC).¹⁹

In the case of contested post office closures, this commission has ninety days to review the complaint, determine whether the closure was “arbitrary or capricious,” and either approve the action or advise the USPS to reconsider. However, all decisions by the PRC are merely advisory and final decisions rest with the postal service.²⁰

General Services Administration (GSA), Surplus Properties Program: Some confusion regarding the USPS’s obligations with GSA has continued throughout recent policy reviews and discussions. The ACHP report *Preserving Historic Post Offices* mentions a 1985 GSA/USPS Agreement and Letter of Understanding (updated in 2005), which would allow GSA the first right of refusal for all surplus historic USPS properties²¹. In the event that GSA has no use for the building, the USPS would then follow the directives of the Historic Surplus Property Program, offering the property to a) other federal agencies, b) state government agencies, c) county government agencies, d) municipal government agencies, and e) the private sector, in that order. A congressional hearing in 1999 on the divestment of the Federal Office Building in Terre Haute, Indiana (housing courts and a post office) also mentions this agreement, implying that the agreement only applies in cases where the property “is excess to the Postal Service for purposes of ownership, yet remains encumbered by existing tenant agreements.”²²

18 Kevin R. Kosar, “The U.S. Postal Service: Common Questions About Post Office Closures.” *Congressional Research Service*. (June 13, 2012). 7.

19 Regarding procedure, *Ibid.*; The PRC is an independent agency that has regulatory oversight over the USPS and deals with issues of law, economics, postal rates, finance, public affairs, and transparency. The Commission is made up of five members, who are appointed by the President with the consent of the Senate. Today, one seat is vacant and the commissioners include Mark Acton, who was an administrator at the Postal Rate Commission; Tony Hammond, previously a private consultant and a director within the Republican National Committee; Robert Taub, previously Special Assistant to the Secretary of the Army; and Nanci Langley, a longtime federal public servant within the United States Senate. ; Postal Regulatory Commission. “About the Postal Regulatory Commission.” *Postal Regulatory Commission* (website), <http://www.prc.gov/about>.

20 39 C.F.R. §3001.72 (Postal Service: Rules of Practice and Procedure: Advisory Opinion and Special Studies)

21 United States Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, *Preserving Historic Post Offices*, 22.

22 United States Congress. House of Representatives. Committee on Government Reform, Subcommittee on Government

Yet, this nuance has not yet been fully addressed and in the USPS's response to the ACHP report, written by Vice President of Facilities Tom Samra, states that:

The ACHP seems to have ignored the financial position of the Postal Service in its Report, suggesting, for example, that the Postal Service donate its property under the Historic Surplus Property Program, even though this would result in NO money going to the Postal Service. The Postal Service receives no tax dollars for its operations, unlike the ACHP and most federal agencies, and it would be irresponsible to give away property when the revenue from property sales is so desperately needed by the Postal Service to fulfill its mandate to provide universal service to every home and business in the United States.²³

This statement does not directly mention of the 1985 agreement and the actual relationship between GSA and the USPS remains unclear.

National Historic Preservation Act, Section 106: Under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (NHPA), all federal agencies, or projects receiving federal funding, must comply with Section 106. Section 106 allows for federally supported actions to go through a review procedure that identifies historic resources, initiates public involvement, invites consulting parties to participate, determines possible effects to historic resources, and works to avoid, minimize, or mitigate harm. If, at any stage in the procedure, it is found that there will be 'no adverse effect' the process is ended. Although, in particular sections of the Postal Reorganization Act (PRA), the need for the USPS to comply with NHPA was made unclear through other permitted regulatory recusals, but the USPS has adopted resolutions that establish Section 106 compliance as a standard policy of the agency.²⁴

The USPS should begin the Section 106 process when it begins to consider divestment of a property; this allows the agency to consider the role of any new owner as a steward of a historically significant property and to take measures to mitigate, minimize, or entirely avoid adverse effects. During the review of the USPS divestment procedure for historic properties, the ACHP looked at Section 106 procedures undertaken for historic post offices sold from 2012 to 2014. In thirteen out of fourteen instances there was a finding of "no adverse effect," thereby ending the Section 106 process prior to any community engagement.²⁵ However, even in cases where Section 106 continued through consultation and resulted in a Memorandum of Agreement (to mitigate any effects), the ACHP was not informed, despite its role as the advisory body in this process, required by federal law to be informed after an initial finding of adverse effects.²⁶

Management, Information, and Technology, *H.R. 2513 To Direct the Administrator of General Services to Acquire a Building Located in Terre Haute, Indiana*, 106th Congress, 1st Session, U.S. Government Printing Office, (September 1999), <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-106hrg64490/html/CHRG-106hrg64490.htm>

23 Tom A. Samra (Vice President, Facilities, USPS) to the ACHP, "RE: 2014 ACHP Report to Congress [...]," (April 28, 2014).

24 This issue is discussed in greater depth in the ACHP Report, *Preserving Historic Post Offices* (see p. 9). "The PRA has exempted the USPS from federal laws 'dealing with public or federal contracts, property, works, officers, employees, budgets, or funds.' 39 U.S.C. § 410." However, as Supreme Court decisions have found that the USPS must comply with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), which is often interpreted in conjunction with NHPA, it is believed that Section 106 would apply even if the USPS had not agreed to voluntarily comply.; Board of Governors of the United States Postal Service, "Policy on Historic Preservation," [No. 82-7], (November 9, 1982).

25 United States Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, *Preserving Historic Post Offices*, 23-24

26 *Ibid.*, 25, 27.

In addition, the presence of New Deal artwork in historic structures automatically initiates the Section 106 process, due to the heightened possibility that the structures may be eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.²⁷

Consulting Parties and Community Engagement: The most widespread critique of the USPS divestment procedures has been the inadequate recognition of interested parties and community stakeholders. While the USPS typically grants consulting party status to state preservation organizations, the postal service has been remiss in not allowing community groups to be involved.²⁸ Particularly when these groups have been established around community responses to a threatened closure, it is inappropriate that the postal service does not give these groups standing within the procedural framework of Section 106. Many groups that ask for consulting party status are refused without any additional comment, or are ignored until the process has been completed.²⁹

Covenants Pertaining to Continued Stewardship of Architecture: Once the USPS has decided to pursue a building's sale, it must create contracts that protect the historic elements of the property with an organization that has the capacity to monitor, preserve, and enforce a covenant. This includes, at a minimum, ensuring against the removal, destruction, or alteration of architectural details. The USPS attempts to form covenants with State Historic Preservation Offices (SHPOs) or local preservation organizations that have adequate capacity and funding; however, in many cases finding an appropriate covenant holder has been difficult and a sale will stall until a covenant holder can be found.³⁰

Ensuring that covenants are not held by the owner of a property helps to guarantee that an independent organization will continue to monitor the historic features of the structure despite changes in ownership or use, thereby providing continuity to the building's stewardship. As covenants are attached to the deed of the property, and therefore run with the land, a new owner must agree to abide by the non-negotiable components of the agreement in the event of the future sale of the property. In the case that a building is treated adversely to these stated restrictions, the covenant holder has the ability and the legal standing to hold the owner responsible to the terms of the covenant and can seek restitution, or the reversal of any actions that remove or alter historic materials. In addition, any consulting parties to the Section 106 process also possess legal standing to challenge the actions of the owner based on the terms of the covenant.³¹

The USPS has favored the use of "preservation covenants" in order to protect the buildings, but has also used these covenants as a way to argue that there are no adverse effects and Section 106 is unnecessary. Controversially, in the early 2010s, the ACHP examined a number of covenants that included a clause allowing for the revision of the covenant following public notice, or the termination of the covenant "for good

27 Office of Inspector General, *Preservation and Disposal of Historic Properties*, 5.

28 *Ibid.*, 6.

29 United States Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, *Preserving Historic Post Offices*, 27.; Office of Inspector General, *Preservation and Disposal of Historic Properties*, 6.

30 Office of Inspector General, *Preservation and Disposal of Historic Properties*, 2.

31 Daniel B. Delahaye (Federal Preservation Officer, USPS), in discussion with the author, April 2016.

cause.”³² This type of loophole, or built-in weakness, makes the promise of continuing stewardship and care ineffective at best. Following the examination of this problem, and in response to recommendations by both the ACHP and the Office of the Inspector General, the USPS has maintained that its covenants are sufficient in the protections that they afford, but has omitted these loopholes in recent divestments.³³

Long-Term Lease Agreements Pertaining to Artwork: In addition to protecting the long-term historic values of the structure, in the case of art objects like murals and sculpture that were produced for these structures, the USPS creates long-term lease agreements with the new owners. This ensures that the USPS retains ownership of “New Deal Arts Collection” items, as these cultural objects are not saleable under federal regulations. The work is technically leased to the new owners for the next twenty-five years (free of charge, and with an option to renew), and can include a conservation stipulation where the new owner pays the cost of necessary conservation work.³⁴

Long-term lease agreements are private contracts, and although standard stipulations for the treatment of artwork are included in all agreements, there may be slight changes due to the negotiations between the USPS and its lessees. The standard long-term lease language is available to the public, but unless the lessee releases the actual, final document, or is a city government or public institution, the agreement remains a strictly private document.

Although the USPS’ maintains a preference for retaining the artwork in situ, this is not a requirement of any new use of the building, and if a long-term lease holder cannot be found, or the new use is not appropriate to the presence of the artwork, the USPS will move art to another location. New locations can include other post offices, government buildings, or temporary relocation to museums for exhibition. Often, while post offices are under renovation, a third-party or interim lease agreement made between the building’s new owner, the USPS, and a third-party, allows for temporary relocation to a venue where the public can still view the work. In the case of the Venice, California Post Office, purchased by movie producer Joel Silver for 7.6 million dollars in October of 2012, the 1941 mural by Edward Biberman was relocated through a third-party agreement to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) [Image 01].³⁵

While these agreements appear to have worked in recent years, ensuring that at least at this juncture the artwork has been conserved and cared for, the status of artwork in buildings sold from 1970 to 2000 is not as clearly monitored. Although these long-term lease agreements have been used for quite some time, the monitoring aspect of the agreements is not effectively enforced.

The 1995 sale of the 1936 Mount Kisco Post Office, in Westchester County, New York, had a standard long-term lease agreement attached to the deed. This lease agreement contains the customary

32 United States Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, *Preserving Historic Post Offices*, 31.

33 Office of Inspector General, *Preservation and Disposal of Historic Properties*, 10.

34 Devin Leonard, “Saving the U.S. Postal Service’s New Deal Masterpieces.” Bloomberg Business. (September 19, 2013), <http://www.bloomberg.com/bw/articles/2013-09-19/saving-the-u-dot-s-dot-postal-service-s-new-deal-masterpieces>

35 Daniel B. Delahaye (Federal Preservation Officer, USPS), in discussion with the author, March 2016.



Image 01. “The Story of Venice,” by Edward Biberman, commissioned by the Section in 1941 for the Venice Post Office in Venice, California.

stipulations regarding insuring the artwork, providing protection from damage and theft, continuing to exhibit the works in situ, and the continued ownership by the USPS of the works themselves.³⁶ However, on a visit to Mount Kisco in March 2016, the two murals, “Indian Cornfield” and “Mount Kisco in 1850,” painted by Thomas Donnelly for the Section, show the loss of paint and continued flaking from persistent water damage [Image 02, 03]. Although the Village of Mount Kisco has taken on stewardship of these works through a long-term lease, the lack of required monitoring or periodic reporting has allowed the Village to be lax in

³⁶ “Memorandum of Agreement between the United States Postal Service and the Village/Town of Mt. Kisco, Westchester County, New York,” Mt. Kisco Assessor’s Office, January 1995.



Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons. Used with the permission of the United States Postal Service®. All rights reserved.

ensuring compliance with its legal duty of care, which requires continued maintenance of the building and protection of the murals. As the leak is not significant enough to require immediate action, the occupants of the building may have failed to bring this to the attention of the Village. However, whether the fault lies with the renter or the owner, the result is a substantial negative impact on the town's and the nation's heritage. While standards outlined in more recent lease agreements require periodic reporting that should assist in this process, all divested post offices with interior art prior to the early 2000s are doubtless facing the same dearth of attention.



Image 02. "Indian Cornfield" by Thomas Donnelly. Mount Kisco, New York. Note discoloration at top right (whitening due to moisture). Used with the permission of the United States Postal Service®. All rights reserved.

Alerting the Curator of the Smithsonian American Art Museum: With the sale of a post office that contains New Deal art, the postal service is required to alert the senior curator of the Smithsonian Museum of American Art as to the status and treatment of the artwork. This was not done in the case of ten properties sold between October 2010 and July 2013, in direct violation of standard procedure.³⁷ Although this is a violation of procedure, no action beyond retroactively alerting the Smithsonian was required.

Moving Forward

While it is easy to criticize the actions of the postal service, it should also be kept in mind that it is not the recent developments in budgetary restrictions and loss of mail volume that have created these issues, instead these conditions have merely exacerbated already existing problems. Much could be improved through the revision of policies and procedures, however the discord between communities and the postal service illustrates the need to reevaluate the national treatment of these structures. In particular, these structures are interpreted as having value beyond their functional use, yet the postal service does little to engage with what that means for the future of these buildings or for the continuing legacy of the postal service itself.

In late 2011, the USPS came under considerable scrutiny, due in large part to the numerous scathing critiques by communities that had suddenly lost a post office, as well as through interagency policy assessments. The USPS announced an informal moratorium on additional post office closures for a period of five months. At the end of this period, Postmaster General Patrick Donahoe announced that

³⁷ The post offices sold include Greenwich and Fairfield, Connecticut; Palm Beach, Florida; Bethesda, Maryland; Beaufort, North Carolina; Erie, Pennsylvania; Ukiah and Venice, California; and Chelsea Michigan; Office of Inspector General, *Preservation and Disposal of Historic Properties*, 3, 4.



Image 03. "Mount Kisco in 1850" by Thomas Donnelly. Mount Kisco, New York. Note discoloration at top left (whitening due to loss of paint). Used with the permission of the United States Postal Service®. All rights reserved.

Meeting the needs of postal customers is, and will always be, a top priority. We continue to balance that by better aligning service options with customer demand and reducing the cost to serve. With that said, we've listened to our customers in rural America, and we've heard them loud and clear – they want to keep their post office open.³⁸

This was meant to reassure rural areas that had seen increased threats to their post offices and signaled that the USPS was revisiting its interpretation of its public service obligations, favoring more limited hours instead of decreased locations in rural settings.

However, continuing opposition to postal service policies has resulted in a number of congressional attempts to overhaul the independent agency. While the various bills have widely divergent language and aims, all have attempted to stabilize the services of the USPS, forbidding additional closures for a period of up to five years, and offering the postponement of payments to RHBF to allow for greater liquidity within the organization.³⁹ In 2015 the USPS chose to delay closures until early 2016, following the advice of a non-binding amendment included within the 2016 congressional budget.⁴⁰

While these periodic moratoriums and policy discussions seem to offer time for comprehensive conversations around policy updates and procedural review, little lasting success or change has occurred. Instead, the opposing sides appear to be maintaining a holding pattern, waiting for the next battle and the next round of announced closures.

38 "New Strategy to Preserve the Nation's Smallest Post Offices." *United States Postal Service*, Release No. 12-054, (May 9, 2012), https://about.usps.com/news/national-releases/2012/pr12_054.htm

39 Eric Katz, "Exclusive: Senator Introduces Bill in Yet Another Attempt to Save the U.S. Postal Service." *Government Executive* (online), (September 17, 2015), <http://www.govexec.com/oversight/2015/09/exclusive-senator-introduces-bill-yet-another-attempt-save-us-postal-service/121247/>

40 Eric Katz, "USPS Suspends Remaining Facility Closures Scheduled for 2015." *Government Executive* (online), (May 26, 2015), <http://www.govexec.com/management/2015/05/usps-suspends-remaining-facility-closures-scheduled-2015/113743/>

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CHAPTER 3

HISTORICAL CONTEXTS OF THE POSTAL SERVICE & THE OFFICE OF THE SUPERVISING ARCHITECT

NO GOVERNMENTAL AGENCY COMES SO CLOSE TO THE INNERMOST INTERESTS
OF SO MANY PEOPLE AS THE UNITED STATES POSTAL ESTABLISHMENT.
IT IS THE KEYSTONE IN THE ARCH OF AMERICAN UNITY.
IT HELPS TO OBLITERATE SECTIONAL LINES AND TO NEUTRALIZE CLASS PREJUDICES. [...]
THIS CENTURY AND A HALF OLD ADVENTURE IN HUMAN SERVICE HAS NOT YET COME TO AN END;
THIS INSPIRING EXPERIMENT IN FRIENDLY HELPFULNESS HAS NOT YET FAILED.
MORE THAN EVER BEFORE THERE IS NEED FOR THE FAITH WHICH HAS FASHIONED OF THE POSTAL
SERVICE AN ALL INCLUSIVE, CONFIDENT, CONQUERING AGENCY FOR
MAKING AMERICA MAKE GOOD.

CLYDE KELLY, 1931

Before introducing the conditions, ideologies, and processes prevalent in the 1930s it is important to discuss the origins and evolution of the institutions that took on the accelerated building projects, relief efforts, and service expansions of the New Deal, discussed here. The postal service and the Office of the Supervising Architect both had long histories prior to the 1930s, and understanding the issues of growth, development, politicization, and community involvement within the postal service and the arguments regarding private versus public architectural commissions and the design ethos within the Office of the Supervising Architect, are essential in understanding how these agencies were equipped to handle the cultural and practical needs of the New Deal.

Part I.

The History of the Postal Service in the United States 1787-1971

In an increasingly digital age, the pervasive presence of the mail system in the daily life of every citizen is quickly diminishing, and the concept of the postal service as a means of cohesion is just as rapidly disappearing. Yet, for over two thousand years prior to the introduction of a postal system in North America, the world had been communicating through a variety of organized postal networks. From the Persian system in 500 BCE, and the Roman *cursus publicus*, courier services were essential to the governments that established them. While today the postal system is thought of as a service between individuals or organizations, the idea of the post as a system of identity, government power, democracy, technological advancement, and knowledge-sharing has been lost as other methods have provided alternatives to achieve the same ends.

When the United States postal system was formally established in 1787, it was through one sentence in the United States Constitution, right after the ability to punish counterfeiters, and preceding the recognition of patents and the proprietary rights of inventors and authors. Article 1, Section 8, Clause 7, or “the Postal Clause,” gives Congress the power “To establish post offices and post roads.”¹ This one sentence created the most active democratic involvement between citizens and their government within the fledging United States.

In 1792, the Post Office Act produced a basic framework and structure for the new government agency, and established three main principles. First, that the post office would be self-supporting. Second, that it would not make a profit, and would instead reinvest in its services. And third, that Congress would establish all post roads.² Today, the first principle is still a source of conflict, however, at the time, the third principle was the most contentious, and ultimately the most important in understanding how the national postal network formed.

1 U.S. Constitution. Article 1, Section 8, Clause 7. (Postal Clause). 1787.

2 Wayne E. Fuller, *The American Mail: Enlarger of the Common Life*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1972), 43.

Although it would have made good sense to allow the Postmaster General to establish post roads and offices where they would be most efficient for the continuing expansion of the system, it was believed that delegating the power of the Postal Clause itself to a postmaster might be unconstitutional. Instead, Congress was left with the power to legislate and did so with startling alacrity throughout the nineteenth century.

While the Revolution had demonstrated the importance of the early – albeit small – colonial post system for strategy, troop movements, and communication along the eastern seaboard, the congressional control of post roads was a boon for the fledgling democracy, creating a politically engaged public from the very beginning. Americans flooded their congressmen with petitions for post roads that would run through their communities, thus incorporating frontier towns more fully into the union. Citizens sent requests for more reliable service, petitioned for the establishment of a post office, and sent letters to complain about lost items or stolen goods. In return, congressmen found that an easy way to gain support among their constituents was to provide these services; in turn inundating the Postmaster General with laws detailing the new routes. The active demands of the people, coupled with an obliging congress, and diligent postmasters allowed for the explosion of the postal service [Chart 02].

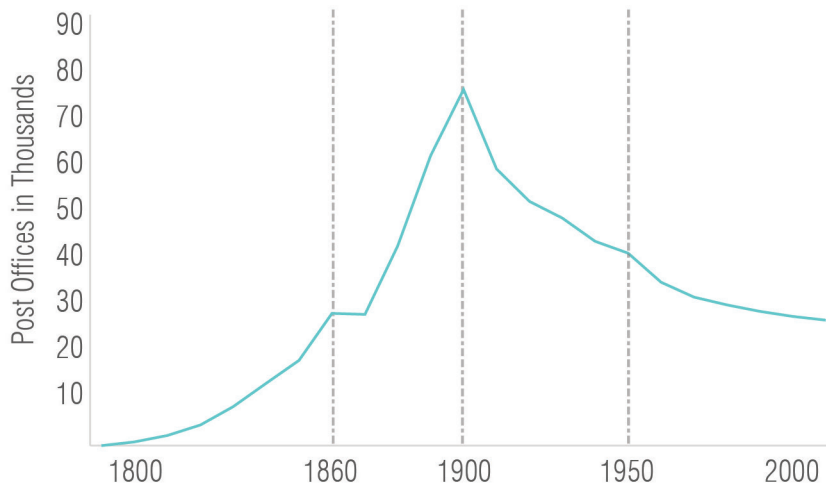


Chart 02. Number of Post Offices from 1800 to 2005.

This pattern of growth, and the belief that the postal system offered a democratic and equal service, was challenged when it became clear that the agency was going heavily into debt, and could not maintain such boundless growth at such a quick rate. With a democratic institution, one that helped to knit a geographically dispersed population together, was it possible to balance the budget at the cost of the service, or should the budget be made to meet the standards of the growing nation? Similar questions of balancing values and fiscal responsibility continue to haunt the postal service.

In 1863, when free city delivery was introduced, only cities of 500,000 inhabitants were eligible for the service.³ However, the postal service was pushed to slowly lower the regulations on what constituted

³ Fuller, *The American Mail*, 71.

a city, and thus expand the system's coverage until the regulation was low enough to be applicable to large towns of 10,000.⁴ Seeing the expansion of cheap and reliable coverage in cities, rural areas then petitioned for free delivery, claiming that congress was partial to business interests to the detriment of the vast rural and farming communities of the nation. In the spirit of equality and democracy, and in an effort to placate their constituents, while stemming allegations of urban preference, Congress and the post office once again relented, introducing Rural Free Delivery (RFD) in 1892 as an experimental program. It was well understood that RFD would cost much more than it would bring in, however, this program was seen as an extension of the public service obligation of the postal system, and despite heavy criticism from congressmen from more urban states, RFD was permanently established in 1902. The acting Postmaster General, Charles Emory Smith, lauded the program as a 'public welfare project,' claiming,

It has been made plain, that this service is a potent educational force; that it brings agricultural life into far closer relationship with the business world; that it keeps the farmer in daily touch with markets and prices; that it advances general intelligence through the increased circulation of legitimate journals and periodicals, stimulates correspondence, quickens all interchanges, promotes good roads, enhances farm value, makes farm life less isolated and more attractive. The national value of these advantages is incalculable.⁵

For Smith, the revenue losses incurred were well worth the service's ability to both minimize vast distances, and also to create a more interconnected nation by ensuring that service reached all of the nation's diverse communities. Today, small towns are returning to these arguments as their post offices are threatened with closure or relocation to nearby towns, arguing that the United States Postal Service has a service obligation to all communities irrespective of the need for a balanced budget.

Yet, with the beginning of the RFD program, many small communities gained more reliable delivery at the loss of their small fourth class post offices.⁶ Under the Pendleton Act of 1883, fourth class post offices were defined by the maximum of their total gross receipts; capped at \$1,900.⁷ As the salary for a fourth class postmaster was determined as a percentage of gross receipts, declining business meant the disappearance of a post office location, making fourth class post offices highly susceptible to change. With mail delivered and picked up from citizens' homes, and the ability to buy stamps directly from the deliveryman, locals had no need to journey from their homesteads to the post office and began to lose the social cohesion created from this common experience. By 1920, nearly 30,000 of the nation's fourth class

4 Fuller, *The American Mail*, 74.

5 Clyde Kelly, *United States Postal Policy*, (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1931), 112-113.

6 Fourth class post offices were established in very small communities where the construction of a dedicated post office building was not a reasonable expense for the government. Fourth class post offices could get by with limited equipment and a desk within a retail space, like a general store. In these instances, the postmaster would also be the store owner, and a change in postmaster meant the movement of the post office. In contrast first, second, and third class post offices reached a population and retail receipt threshold that made the construction of a dedicated building more appropriate, and the postmasters were chosen as political appointees.; Fuller, *The American Mail*.

7 National Archive and Records Administration. "A4212: First-, Second-, and Third-Class Post Office Receipts and Postmasters' Salaries, 1895-1905." (finding aid, hosted online) Records of the Post Office Department, Record Group 28, National Archives Building, Washington, D.C., 2014, 1, <https://twelvekey.files.wordpress.com/2014/10/a4212-final.pdf>.

post offices (estimated around 70,000 in 1900) had disappeared, and often the community associated with the post office had also disappeared, having lost its fragile identity. Understanding the changing American landscape through the movement of the mail, as representative of a national presence, only amplifies the fact that the mail system has always been more than merely a service. In fact, the presence or disappearance of these places has had remarkable impacts on the ways the nation has connected, self-identified, and evolved.

A study published in 2016, discussed in a working paper from the National Bureau of Economic Research, explored this issue through understanding post office locations as an element of national infrastructure with far-reaching effects. This study looked at the value of the postal system as a catalyst for innovation and development. Like Postmaster General Smith's public welfare argument, the conclusions within "State Capacity and American Technology: Evidence from the 19th Century" argue that the ancillary benefits of a postal network as a piece of federal infrastructure were essential in fostering the development of innovative technology in nineteenth-century America.⁸ Much of the contemporary national identity of Americans as innovative, industrious, and creative, can therefore be tied to the federal provision of a framework that could support and recognize this activity. With the post office, patents, networks of information-sharing, and innovation could expand across the nation; in its absence, the recognition of this activity would have been impossible.

Beyond the role of the post office as an infrastructure and communication network, the post office's importance as a political tool cannot be understated. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the appointment of postmasters in cities and more populated towns was understood to be an inherently political act. Post offices were used as an extension of the political machine through the appointment of a postmaster who was a supporter of the party in power. With all communication moving through the postal system, the post office became a hub of political information and dialogue. The postmaster could monitor the feelings of the community and was often active in petitioning the acting congressman on behalf of that community.

Until the introduction of civil service reform, the postmaster (particularly in the context of small communities) was a respected community member who served a variety of roles, from community representative to political organizer. When civil service reform was first suggested, there was extreme pushback from smaller communities which felt invested in their postmaster. Beyond the fact that the postmaster typically came from within the community, people developed close relationships with the person who monitored their mail, shared their stories and news, and forwarded their concerns. It was within this era and ethos that the New Deal post offices are situated.

With the changes in American development following the Second World War, the post office typology saw significant changes, making the structures built in the 1930s and 1940s among the last of their kind. With the widespread availability of the automobile, the suburbanization of the United States, and

⁸ Daron Acemoglu, Jacob Moscona, and James A. Robinson, "State Capacity and American Technology: Evidence from the 19th Century." (working paper) NBER Working Paper Series, National Bureau of Economic Research, (January 2016).

Image 04. Redondo Beach Post Office, Redondo, California. At time of opening in 1936. Now razed. Image courtesy of National Archives, College Park, MD. Record Group 121-BS.



the focus on mass infrastructure like highways, the post office was slowly moved towards the periphery of towns and municipalities. In addition, the continually increasing mail bulk handled by these offices created a need for larger mail sorting facilities. Thus many centrally located post offices were divested from the United States Postal Service's real estate portfolio from the 1970s through the 1990s in order to build new, larger post offices outside of town. This move away from town centers allowed mail to be delivered by freight trucks, instead of by train, and allowed suburban and automobile-driven Americans to park near the post office, something that was difficult in more densely built areas.

In some cases, usually associated with the earliest divestments of the New Deal structures, historic buildings have been lost as part of the long-term changes caused by a town's development. In Batesburg, South Carolina, a New Deal post office was constructed adjacent to the railroad, in the center of town in the late 1930s or early 1940s, and contained a 1941 Section mural, "Peach Orchard," by Irving A. Block. However, the town's growth and close proximity to neighboring Leesville, South Carolina, resulted in the joining of the towns as Batesburg-Leesville. As a symbol of the town's new identity and to serve a practical purpose of access, a larger post office was constructed in 1980 on the largely undeveloped land between the two historic town centers.⁹ This location allowed for better access by freight trucks and increased square footage to handle both new machinery and increasing mail volumes. The historic post office has remained, and is believed to be privately owned, but has sat vacant for years; its 1941 mural is thought to still be inside.¹⁰

In another instance, the 1936 post office in Redondo Beach, California was built on land along the

⁹ "Old Batesburg Post Office," *New Deal Art Registry*, <http://www.newdealartregistry.org/render/sites/BatesburgLeesville/SC/>.

¹⁰ According to a photographer who was able to enter the privately-owned, vacant building in 2004, the mural was still in its original location; Jimmy Emerson, "Batesburg, SC Post Office Mural," flickr. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/auvet/10635727123>.



Image 05 and 06. Preliminary cartoon on left and final mural at time of completion on right. Redondo Beach Post Office, California, “Excursion Train & Picknickers in the Nineties” by Paul Sample. Image courtesy of National Archives, College Park, MD. Record Group 121-CMS.

main boulevard, but by 1977 had been rendered obsolete by a new post office in a more industrial location, one mile north and adjacent to the Pacific Coast Highway (CA State Route 1) [Image 04]. The 1937 murals by Paul Sample were moved to the new location and the 1930s building was razed [Image 05, 06]. Today, the site of the old post office has been redeveloped as condominiums.¹¹

Simultaneous with these changes in morphology, the overarching system was also experiencing substantial change. Since the 1960s the postal service has suffered from an inability to make quick innovations and substantial organizational changes due to its status as a federal executive department. The 1967 Commission on Postal Reorganization, formed under President Lyndon B. Johnson, resulted in a number of proposals for better management, including the creation of an independent corporation, creating a system to support collective bargaining rights, and the elimination of the traditional system of appointments based on political patronage.¹² Following years of Congressional studies and hearings, and a nationwide strike of postal workers in March of 1970, the United States Postal Service (USPS) was created through the Postal Reorganization Act (PRA) of 1970 and signed into law by President Richard Nixon.¹³ It was at this time that the postal service became an independent government agency with an official monopoly. This has meant a general change in the interface between the USPS and the rest of the federal agencies; postal service property was transferred from the General Service Administration (GSA) to the USPS, civil service reform

11 “Memories of the Queen Anne and Redondo Beach,” [interview with Mrs. Adele Santo], *Redondo Beach Historical Society*, http://www.redondohistorical.org/?page_id=122

12 “Reform Proposal,” *United States Postal Service*, https://about.usps.com/publications/pub100/pub100_034.htm

13 “Postal Reorganization Act,” *United States Postal Service*, https://about.usps.com/publications/pub100/pub100_035.htm

was instituted across the system, and Congress has since attempted to return more strictly to the idea of the postal service as a self-sufficient organization, eliminating subsidies since 1982, except under specific and unique circumstances.¹⁴

It is important to stress the fact that the post office was not privatized. Instead, in this case, “independent” means that the agency is run outside of the cabinet agencies of the executive branch, and like other independent agencies including the CIA and NASA, it is given significant freedom in terms of management, finance, and meeting its public purpose. As defined by the Congressional Research Service,

The USPS often is mischaracterized as a quasi-governmental or private entity. It is neither. The USPS is a government agency that was created by Congress to achieve various public purposes. Federal law defines what products and services the Postal Service may offer. Additionally, the USPS’s employees are federal employees who participate in the Civil Service Retirement System, the Federal Employees Retirement System, and the Federal Employees Health Benefits Program.¹⁵

And as stated by the Supreme Court in 2004:

The PRA’s designation of the Postal Service as an “independent establishment of the executive branch of the Government of the United States,” 39 U. S. C. §201, is not consistent with the idea that the Postal Service is an entity existing outside the Government. Indeed, the designation indicates just the contrary. The PRA gives the Postal Service a high degree of independence from other Government offices, but it remains part of the Government.¹⁶

The confusion around the agency’s “independence” has created many of the inconsistencies in the public dialogue over what the role of the USPS should be today. Clarification on this issue, would provide the public with a better understanding of the responsibilities and the roles of the USPS.

Part II.

The Role of the Office of the Supervising Architect

Increasing geographic spread across the continent spurred the need for constantly expanding networks of post roads, yet increasing population density in recently established towns and cities, and newly added states, created a need for the construction of an enormous number of post offices (refer to Chart 2, on page 29). However, it was not until the middle of the nineteenth century that there was any regulated procedure for the construction of federal buildings.¹⁷ Prior to this, the government supplied funds for first- and second-class post offices but delegated design, construction, and oversight to locals; often holding competitions for architects within the region.

14 Although the USPS did receive public subsidies through 1982, these were targeted to assist the agency in becoming financially self-sufficient and were not due to a negative balance or financial need on the part of the USPS.; June Thomas, “United States Postal Service,” *Slate*. (May 24, 1998), http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/the_gist/1998/05/united_states_postal_service.html

15 Kevin R. Kosar, “The U.S. Postal Service’s Financial Condition: A Primer.” *Congressional Research Service*. (July 24, 2013), http://postalmuseum.si.edu/research/pdfs/USPS_Financial_Condition.pdf, 1.

16 *Postal Service v. Flamingo Industries Ltd.*, 540 U.S. 736 (2004)

17 Landau, *Edward T. and William A. Potter: American Victorian Architects*, 278.

In 1853, the Office of the Supervising Architect was established within the Bureau of Construction of the Treasury Department. Beginning in 1862, the officially named 'Office of the Supervising Architect, Treasury Department' was more formally established, and Congress began the slow process of expanding the staff and funding the department to allow for the greater involvement of the Supervising Architect in federal projects throughout the nation; making plans for all public buildings the responsibility of the Supervising Architect in 1875.¹⁸

Yet, the role of the Supervising Architect was often the subject of debate. Due to the sheer volume of work, early Supervising Architects were unable to devote time to the refinement of design. In the late nineteenth century, under Supervising Architect William Appleton Potter, a bill was proposed that would have the Supervising Architect act in a merely supervisory capacity to ensure that plans and construction specifications met the federal government's standards, while leaving design to architects in private practice.¹⁹ Potter, in support of the bill, argued that architecture was an art, an art that required time, reflection, and immersion in each setting; this required a level of attention that he was unable to give while overseeing a number of projects across the nation. Potter also spoke of service to the public, believing that the people had a right to expect nothing less than architectural and aesthetic excellence in their public buildings.²⁰ Although this bill was never passed, it was the beginning of a larger dialogue that sought to define the relationship between private practitioners, public buildings, and the Office of the Supervising Architect.

The Tarsney Act of 1893 sought to resolve this tension, and allowed the Treasury Department great discretion in holding competitions and delegating work to the private sphere.²¹ Yet, the Tarsney Act's repeal in 1912, only nineteen years later, illustrated the belief that the value of private architects did not outweigh the difficulty in managing these projects or the friction that arose between private practitioners and the Treasury Department on issues of who retained executive control of construction, plans, and determining qualitative standards.²² In addition, it was believed by Congress that the Office of the Supervising Architect could build to the same quality and design standard much more cheaply.²³ This debate, between the artistic variety made possible through the hiring of private architects, versus the economy of time and money in standardizing work through the Supervising Architect's office was an argument that continued until the elimination of the office in the 1940s.

18 Landau, *Edward T. and William A. Potter: American Victorian Architects*, 279.; for notes on 1875 legislation see *Ibid*, 280.

19 *Ibid.*, 284.

20 *Ibid.*, 282.

21 *Ibid.*, 285.

22 Smith, *The Office of the Supervising Architect*, 28.

23 *Ibid.*, 29.

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CHAPTER 4
CREATING RELIEF FOR THE NATION
AT THE TREASURY DEPARTMENT:
THE OFFICE OF THE SUPERVISING ARCHITECT AND
THE SECTION OF FINE ARTS

WINDOWS, ARCHES, BRICKS AND CEMENT;
WE'RE THE P.O. BOYS OF THE GOVERNMENT.
WE'RE GRINDING THEM OUT LAP AFTER LAP,
SISTERVILLE, HICKORY, BIG STONE GAP,
WINNEMUCCO, YAZOO CITY, PARAQUEE;
TAINT ARCHITECTURE, MEN, IT'S GEOGRAPHIE.

E.I. WILLIAMS, 1935

At the height of the Great Depression in 1933, unemployment effected thirteen to fifteen million people, or 24.9% of the United States labor force.¹ The nearly overnight disappearance of opportunity for the average wage earner made the themes of honest and productive labor the tropes of the decade. Getting the nation back to work was the first priority, and when the first job-creation relief efforts were temporarily stopped, protests ensued and petitions came to Congress from all across the nation. An article in *Fortune* magazine stated, “Direct relief is – purely and simple- the Dole. Almost as purely and simply, work relief is the Dole, too, expect that it does provide a little more self respect [sic] for its recipients: at least it creates for them the fiction that they are still useful citizens and that there is work for them to do.”²

The concept of the modern welfare state was still in its infancy and largely unarticulated as a comprehensive approach; FDR’s New Deal laid the foundation for the welfare state in the United States, allowing millions of Americans to provide for themselves and their families. Yet, with the example of the small town post office decorated with art, the New Deal took a step past pure relief. The concern was still with the common man, but while the creation of post offices created jobs and stimulated construction, it also provided the opportunity to expand an infrastructure system that touched the lives of every American. Increased federal spending allowed for an investment in local communities that was without precedent. For the first time, a number of communities received structures that were expressive of a federal presence, and for many citizens this was the only tangible sign of the federal government in their daily lives. In many states where New Deal post offices were located almost exclusively in small towns, the buildings gained a preeminence that is difficult to imagine today. In the words of the multiple property National Register documentation form for New Deal post offices in Mississippi, where all post offices were located in towns of less than 38,000 residents “In a large city a post office may be lost amidst the dense urban fabric, but in a small town a post office is a centerpiece, a source of civic pride, and a link with the world at large.” “Finally these post office buildings are important local landmarks in each of their small town settings; they are crucial to the life, activity, and economy of the [...] communities they serve.”³

This approach to leaving a lasting federal legacy illustrates the larger ideology of the 1930s federal programming. While the New Deal is always associated with job creation and monetary relief, it extended far beyond purely monetary assistance. The Great Depression rocked the nation’s understanding of itself, and in order to secure the future of the nation, the New Deal sought to define an America without a frontier, an America that could not escape a bust year by moving ever westwards. In the 1930s, the United States had to determine what it thought was important in cementing a national identity. The post offices of the era mark one aspect of that thinking; by focusing on expressions of regional identity and national themes, these structures are expressions of this specific historical moment and fitting monuments to the federal preoccupation with the public realm.

1 Gene Smiley, “Recent Unemployment Rate Estimates for the 1920s and 1930s,” *Journal of Economic History*, (June 1983), 488.

2 Article quoted, Robert E Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins: An Intimate History*, (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1950), 57.

3 National Register of Historic Places, “Four Building Act of 1926 Post Offices and Thirty-Two Public Works Administration Post Offices, 1921-1941 [Multiple Property Documentation Form, Thematic Resources],” Mississippi, October 1980.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt: President, Philanthropist, Postal Enthusiast, and Designer

Much has been written about the life of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the 32nd President of the United States, however, it is impossible to discuss the New Deal, or the role of the postal service within the New Deal without understanding the influence of FDR's personal interest in history, the postal service, design, and civic planning. As one historian asserts:

To understand much of the architecture during the New Deal, and the post office program in particular, is to understand the workings of the Office of the Supervising Architect a bureau within the Treasury Department. And to understand the Office of the Supervising Architect is to understand from where FDR found inspiration and aesthetic value: from his genealogical ancestors and their place in local Hudson Valley history, the houses they inhabited, and the American spirit that both represented to him.⁴

The Roosevelt home, Hyde Park, is located in Dutchess County in the Hudson River Valley of New York; an area that is steeped in early Dutch history that speaks to the colonial origins of New York. FDR's interest in remnants of the Dutch influence led him to explore the area's history, his own family's genealogy, and taught him to value the visible remnants of that history. Additionally, as Hyde Park is located on the Albany Post Road, and FDR, as a boy, was given a stamp collection by his uncle, he developed a significant interest in the role of the postal service and the visible expression of the nation's expansion as seen in the presence of the nation's post roads. While governor of New York, FDR had the milestone markers of the post road protected with stone enclosures to ensure their survival.⁵ Later, as president, FDR approved the design of over 200 stamps; in some cases, he made suggestions and design changes; he took full credit for the design of the six cent airmail stamp of 1938, and claimed partial credit of a number of others.⁶

With the beginning of the New Deal program, FDR became extremely involved not only in shaping the ideology and the aims of the post office building program, but also in assisting in the design and execution of all six post offices in the Mid-Hudson Valley. No detail was too small for the president, who remained actively involved in the design, planning, decoration, and dedication of the post offices of Beacon, Wappingers Falls, Poughkeepsie, Hyde Park, Rhinebeck, and Ellenville. Although discussions around the 'president as architect' drew criticism from some corners of the architectural profession, those who worked with him found him to be dedicated to providing high-quality architecture that spoke to both a community's history and context. At the dedication of the Rhinebeck Post Office, Secretary of the Treasury Henry J. Morgenthau, Jr., expressed the value of the president's leadership and dedication to the larger context of the building program: "In the ideas we have put into effect in the public building program we have followed the

4 Jim Blackburn, "The Architect and the Artist: FDR, Olin Dows, and the New Deal Post Office Program", *New York History Review*. v. 7, n. 1. 2013. <http://nyhrarticles.blogspot.com/2013/02/the-architect-and-artist-fdr-olin-dows.html>

5 Bernice L. Thomas, *The Stamp of FDR: New Deal Post Offices in the Mid-Hudson Valley*, (Fleischmanns, New York: Purple Mountain Press, 2002), 76.

6 *Ibid.*, 76-7.

Image 07: The Rhinebeck Post Office, Rhinebeck, New York. Modified after a historic Dutch farmhouse. Image courtesy of Peter Radunzel (flickr).



lead of one, whose enthusiastic interest in the project of building beautiful and serviceable and appropriate public buildings never flags.”⁷

The Rhinebeck Post Office, in Rhinebeck, New York, received the most attention from FDR, who chose an old Dutch farmhouse as the model for the building’s design, corresponded with the Supervising Architect about the precise materials (original stone from the historic farmhouse) to be used in the construction, outlined which changes to the original farmhouse design could be undertaken without a loss of the Dutch colonial aesthetic (the roof was extended to cover the entire front of the building), and spoke with the artist commissioned by the Section, the well-regarded painter, Rhinebeck resident, and distant cousin of FDR, Olin Dows [Image 07].⁸

FDR was highly cognizant of how to reach the people. He was not shy of using new technology, like the automobile, which allowed him to reach more constituents along the campaign trail, or the radio, which allow him to speak directly to the American people, yet his foresight did not mean that he was not grounded in his both a personal and a national sense of history. It is for this reason that the use of the post office as a symbol during the New Deal was so effective. For many Americans the post office was a core element of their daily life, and the only physical manifestation of the federal government in their communities. Through the post office program, FDR saw the opportunity to reimagine what the role of government was to the people, and how this change would allow the nation’s citizens to begin to reimagine their experience within the nation. While the post office building program met the ideological goals of FDR in terms of history, symbolism, federal responsibility, and an American renaissance, it was fitting that he was able to pursue this through the established capacity of the Supervising Architect’s Office, which was the only department

with the administrative and technical ability to start work immediately.⁹

⁷ “Morgenthau’s Speech at P.O.,” *Poughkeepsie Eagle-News*, (May 2, 1939), 9.

⁸ Thomas, *The Stamp of FDR*, 57–65.

⁹ Lee, *Architects to the Nation*, 238.

Stimulating the Construction Industry and Recruiting the Prima Donnas

The passing of the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) in June of 1933, created the first of President Roosevelt's New Deal programs, the Public Works Administration (PWA). Although the PWA was short-lived – NIRA was found to be unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 1935 – the programmatic approach to federal funding of nationwide construction was wrapped into the next iteration of the New Deal, providing the programs and relief work that is synonymous with American life in the 1930s.

For the purposes of the post offices discussed here, the first substantial funding to the Treasury Department came from the PWA, with 3.3 billion dollars awarded in 1933, and an additional 65 million to the Treasury Department's Procurement Division from Congress in 1933.¹⁰ In August of 1934, the mandate from FDR to spend all available funds as quickly as possible to stimulate job creation caused Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau, Jr. to assemble the administration of the Office of the Supervising Architect and demand immediate action. As the story was relayed by a contemporary article in *The Architectural Forum*, Morgenthau stated:

1. I want this money spent. I want all these jobs out on the market by January 1, 1935, and I don't care how you do it.
2. I want this money spent economically. No frills, no extras. If you can save \$25 on any of these buildings, save it!

This set in motion the development of two main divisions within the Supervising Architect's Office, the one which consisted of government employees working on smaller, highly standardized projects costing under \$60,000, and one of twenty-one private architects and three hundred draftsmen who were recruited to take on larger projects and increase the capacity of the department. While the permanent staff of the Supervising Architect largely adapted twenty-four standardized plans to a variety of locations, making changes to reflect local conditions and materials, the temporary staff, labelled the 'Prima Donnas' by the office's permanent employees, worked on a number of large and more expensive properties in regional groupings (the Middle Atlantic, Pacific Coast, Southwest, etc.).¹¹ Through this approach and with the continuing assistance of federal relief funding, over three times the number of post offices were built in a single decade than had been built over the previous half century.¹²

Federal Engagement with the Arts

Simultaneous to the rapid mobilization of the architecture and construction industries, the New Deal was also engaging with the idea of supporting all trades and livelihoods. The most well-known of the federal relief programs, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) established in 1935, employed not

¹⁰ "Washington Concentration Camp," *The Architectural Forum*, (February 1935), 149.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 151-3.

¹² National Park Service, National Register of Historic Places. *Bulletin 13: How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Post Offices*. (Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, 1984, revised, 1994), 3.

only the average unemployed American (mostly unskilled men), but also 5,300 artists, 16,000 musicians, 12,700 performers, and nearly 6,700 writers through a subsidiary program called Federal Project Number One. Yet, even prior to this program, the federal government was already engaging with support for the arts, through the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) in 1933, and the establishment of the Treasury Section of Painting & Sculpture (later renamed the Section of Fine Arts, but referred to as 'the Section') in 1934.

The inspiration for the federal engagement with the arts in the 1930s is credited to the bold letter-writing of artist George Biddle. In May of 1933, Biddle wrote a letter to FDR (they had been friends at Groton School, an elite college preparatory boarding school in Massachusetts), suggesting the adoption of a federally-funded mural program in the spirit of the Mexican muralist movement.

The Mexican artists have produced the greatest national school of mural painting since the Italian Renaissance. Diego Rivera tells me that it was only possible because [Mexican President Álvaro] Obregón allowed Mexican artists to work at plumber's wages in order to express on the walls of the government buildings the social ideals of the Mexican revolution. The younger artists of America are conscious as they have never been of the social revolution that our country and civilization are going through; and they would be eager to express these ideals in a permanent art form if they were given the government's cooperation. They would be contributing to and expressing in living monuments the social ideals that you are struggling to achieve.¹³

FDR's interest in the proposal resulted in the establishment of the PWAP within the Treasury Department's Procurement Division in December 1933.

The short-lived PWAP was a true relief program for artists founded on the idea expressed famously and succinctly by relief administrator Harry Hopkins: "Hell! They've got to eat just like other people."¹⁴ While the PWAP extended much farther in scope than merely supporting mural painting, this was the first attempt by the federal government to engage with widespread arts patronage, testing the waters for future programs and determining the feasibility of regulating content. The regulation of content and the attempt to guide artists towards expressing uniquely American and democratic ideals was of great concern at this time, particularly as contemporaneous with Biddle's letter, a newly painted mural at Rockefeller Center by Diego Rivera that featured Vladimir Lenin was removed under orders of John D. Rockefeller, Jr.; a substantial reminder that patron and artist do not always share a vision.¹⁵

Although the PWAP lasted only seven months, over 400 murals had been added to public buildings and over 1,500 prints, paintings, and drawings had been created. With the program's expiration in June 1934, the PWAP's director, Edward Bruce, became involved in the creation and organization of the Section. Edward Bruce had been a lawyer, until in 1922 he chose to follow his dream of becoming a professional painter. After a brief time spent studying abroad, he returned to the United States and exhibited at a number of New York galleries. He and his direct staff, including Edward Rowan (an artist) and Forbes Watson (an

¹³ George Biddle, *An American Artist's Story*, (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1939), 268-9.

¹⁴ Quoted in Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins: An Intimate History*, 57.

¹⁵ Marling, *Wall to Wall America*, 31.

art critic), were chosen from outside of Washington, D.C.'s established civil service to run the Section and guide its ideology.¹⁶

Bruce believed that with the disappearance of the American frontier, the nation was left to return to a "spiritual frontier," which had been lost in the more physical and geographic rhetoric of the nation's manifest destiny.

If our standard of living is to be raised we must secure new frontiers, and I am sure that these frontiers are largely going to come in the field of art and science and literature. I believe that through their development we can, in this country, raise the standard of living of our people, not perhaps based on the dollars and cents which they have to spend, but on what they are to receive in the development of a richer and fuller life.¹⁷

Now, in order to begin this American renaissance, the cultural fields were in need of a patron to provide for and direct this spiritual growth.¹⁸ This belief, particularly as pertaining to art, was in part supported by the substantial increase in both the importation of foreign art between the end of the First World War and the Great Depression, and the increasing number of American artists between 1910 and 1920.¹⁹ The United States' newfound wealth and stability had allowed for more people to seek sustainable careers as artists; and in the same period in which the United States saw a sixteen percent increase in total population, there was a sixty-two percent increase in persons employed as artists.²⁰

As a representative of this new wave of art, and as an administrator with great power to shape the role of the federal government as patron, Bruce chose to task the Section with being a harbinger of good taste, of quality, and of truly American art. Among the many New Deal art programs, the Section was unique in its intention to integrate quality art into the daily life of the average citizen, imaging post offices not only as the communication centers of communities, but also as "democratic art galleries," bringing the arts into the daily dialogue of the people.²¹

Funding the Arts: Introducing the 1%

Coupling the distinctive purpose of the Section with the widespread establishment of post offices across the nation, was important in creating national art galleries but was also an effective strategy for ensuring funding and close integration between buildings and artwork. The two programs, housed within the Treasury Department's Procurement Division, could work together to ensure best results.

16 Park and Markowitz, *Democratic Vistas*, 7.

17 "Statements by Procurement Division Officers at the Hearings before the Committee on Patents, House of Representatives: New Frontiers not Physical" (Edward Bruce to the Committee), *Bulletin: Section of Painting and Sculpture*, n. 3, (May-June 1935), Record Group 121, Entry 130, Box 1, "Bulletins," National Archives Building, College Park, Maryland.

18 Marling, *Wall to Wall America*, 48.

19 Frederick P. Keppel and R.L. Duffus, *The Arts in American Life*, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1933), 17-19.

20 While the authors express caution about the use of these statistics, they do remark that the increase in use of the proper title of 'artist' as an occupation indicates increased activity and growing prestige in the arts.; *Ibid.*, 20.

21 Park and Markowitz, *Democratic Vistas*, 8.



Image 08. Beverly Hills Post Office, Beverly Hills, California, 1934. Image courtesy of National Archives, College Park, MD. Record Group 121-BS.

Historically, one percent of a building's budget was dedicated to its "embellishment"; this generally meant decorative grill work and lighting fixtures. Yet, by dedicating this one percent to artwork through an initial gentleman's agreement, which was later formalized, the Section could be assured of funding without annual review by Congress.²² For this reason, the Section experienced a level of autonomy that was uncommon in this decade, as most New Deal programming for the arts was required to seek Congressional support to ensure ample continued funding.²³ Despite this independence, the fact that Bruce was interested in making the Section a permanent part of the Treasury Department, meant that he worked to keep the Section free from controversy and in the good graces of Congress. It is for this reason that many scholars believe that the Section is not very well known despite the vast number of projects it completed. Instead, the WPA relief programs like Federal Project Number One, which are more commonly known, were highly covered by contemporary media, particularly in rare instances of violent strikes, while Section work was rarely covered and often mis-attributed to the WPA.²⁴

The only issue with relying on the extra one percent left unused by the Supervising Architect, was that some projects went over budget and the one percent was used to cover general construction costs long

²² Marling, *Wall to Wall America*, 49.

²³ Park and Markowitz, *Democratic Vistas*, 178.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 49-50.



Image 09 and 10. “Post Rider” (left) and “Air Mail” (right) by Charles Kassler, for the Beverly Hills Post Office, Beverly Hills, California. Commissioned by the Section. Image courtesy of National Archives, College Park, MD. Record Group 121-CMS.

before the Section could commission a work of art. For this reason, the Section would only begin to plan for murals or sculpture when buildings were twenty-five percent complete.²⁵ In rare cases, the Section was required to tell an artist who had already started the design process that funds were no longer available, but that a new project would be located for them to work on.

Art and Architecture: The Bedfellows of the Treasury Department

Close association between the Section and the Supervising Architect’s Office, within the Treasury Department, also allowed greater communication between architect and artist. During the competition for the Beverly Hills, California post office in 1935, the architect, Ralph C. Flewelling was included on the five person commission in charge of the mural competition [Image 08]. Flewelling met with interested artists at the post office to show them the materials used in the lobby, the color scheme, the available locations for mural placement, and the lighting scheme. He helped answer questions from the artists regarding specifications, and from the commission itself in determining which works most closely complimented his vision for the building. This is not to say that the architect wielded inordinate power within these competitions. Ralph Flewelling did not participate in the actual voting of the committee, deferring to the committee’s 25 Park and Markowitz, *New Deal for Art*, 36.

artists and art critics, but wrote to the Section to express his own opinions regarding the works submitted in relation to the architectural considerations of the space.²⁶ In an attempt to ensure that architectural considerations were kept under strong advisement, Flewelling asked that the Supervising Architect, Louis A. Simon, be invited to sit in on the Section's discussions in Washington, D.C.²⁷

While the committee recommended the work of five artists who they thought most promising, they recommended that the two murals finally chosen be from different artists. Flewelling thought this would be detrimental to the cohesion of the lobby – particularly as it related to the color palette of the works – and recommended that the Section award the commission to only one artist. The Section agreed with his recommendation to select one artist, but it ignored his personal recommendation of who, and it was with some controversy that the Section finally selected Charles A. Kassler to decorate the lobby with two works, “Post Rider” and “Air Mail,” depicting the history of the postal service. Flewelling and Kassler worked closely on finalizing the designs, and collaborated on the final treatment of the lobby's paint, moldings, and lighting [Image 09 and 10]. The correspondence between both artist and architect and the Section administration illustrates the camaraderie between the two throughout the final discussions of the building's completion.²⁸ The Section was pleased with Kassler's work and when more funding became available through the Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP) they asked him to design another six murals for the Beverly Hills post office and to select additional artists from the relief lists who would be able to help him complete the work.²⁹

Competitions Bring Controversy

As one of the earliest competitions organized by the Section, the Beverly Hills Post Office was fraught with controversy. By the end of the process hundreds of artists in greater Los Angeles had signed a petition protesting that the competition was unfair in result and poorly run. The commission's chairman, Merle Armitage, a modern art collector and critic, asked to relinquish all further duties as chairman, citing his disappointment in and distaste for the reaction of the California artists. Bruce responded personally to Armitage, touching on the issues of context that made the Section's goals so difficult to achieve in its first competitions; “I realize that the artists of Southern California may feel their isolation, and the necessity for protecting their interests by complaints, but I had hoped that the vast efforts which we are making here [...] would make them realize the wise thing was to support rather than criticize the project.”³⁰ The controversy

26 Ralph Flewelling to Edward Rowan (Section administrator), March 20, 1935. Record Group 121 (Records of the Public Buildings Service), Entry 133 (Case Files Concerning the Embellishments of Federal Buildings, 1934-1943), Box 5, [Folder: Post Office – Beverly Hills, California], National Archives Building, College Park, Maryland.

27 Ibid.

28 RG 121, Entry 133, Box 5, [Folder: Post Office – Beverly Hills, California], National Archives Building, College Park, Maryland.

29 The Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP), was a relief-based art program that used specific funds from the WPA to hire artists who qualified for financial relief. This was unlike the Section as the Section selected artists based on the quality of their submitted designs. TRAP funding was often used in urban locations with larger, more expensive, post offices – designed by the Prima Donnas – that could have much more artwork added to the building beyond the funding available under the Section. These projects sometimes included an initial Section-funded work, as in the case of Beverly Hills, but were then awarded additional funds by TRAP to add more artwork to the building. This expanded program allowed for a lead designer (like Charles Kassler) to select additional artists from the relief roles to assist with completing the designs.

30 Edward Bruce to Merle Armitage, May 7, 1935, RG 121, Entry 133, Box 5, [Folder: Post Office – Beverly Hills, Califor-

resulted in the involvement of Congressman John F. Dockweiler of California, who wrote to the Supervising Architect to express that his constituents found the addition of murals a “disfigurement to the building. [...] the patrons of the post office do not think that they add to the beauty of the building.”³¹ The Section, however, was simultaneously in contact with the Postmaster, who wished to hold a small exhibit in the post office to display designs from the competition, and from the Art Center School of Los Angeles, which hoped to organize a similar exhibit.³² The only letters of complaint received were from disgruntled artists, not from the average visitors to the post office, and the Section was able to disregard Dockweiler and his reputed ‘concerned constituents.’

The Section was largely undaunted by these complaints. Due to the newness of the program; they understood that competitions would be controversial when the goal was to select a work of the highest quality for the building at hand. In addition, the fact that so many artists were out of work and found it difficult to bear the costs in materials and time to compete, increased the stakes for applicants and resulted in hundreds of disgruntled letters from artists throughout the region. The Section stood by its process however, and defended its actions in many of the early issues of its monthly *Bulletin*.³³ In a number of articles and letters, the administration explained their process and assured the public of the equality and fairness of the competitions. A letter of complaint from the Mural Painters’ Society in New York City in particular, was reprinted in full in the December 1935 *Bulletin* with commentary by the painter Olin Dows, who was briefly a Section administrator.³⁴ An important point that was stressed by Dows, and became the saving grace of the Section in fending off disgruntled artists, was the agency’s approach to creating long-term files on the artists who had participated in competitions, asking runners-up to accept appointments in towns throughout the region in which they had initially competed.³⁵ In this way, the competitions for larger post offices in more important regional cities, like Beverly Hills, provided a number of appointments for murals and sculpture in towns across Southern California.

Regional Adaptations

Although many of the nation’s small post offices were constructed to a few standardized floor plans and a limited number of architectural styles and façade designs, the Office of the Supervising Architect remained very responsive to community conditions and opinions. Much of this approach can be credited to the influence of FDR, who, early in his presidency, wrote a memo to guide the designs coming out of the Office of the Supervising Architect, specifying that all federal buildings should be:

nia], National Archives Building, College Park, Maryland.

31 John F. Dockweiler to Louis A. Simon, May 28, 1935. RG 121, Entry 133, Box 5, [Folder: Post Office – Beverly Hills, California], National Archives Building, College Park, Maryland.

32 Ralph Flewelling to Edward Rowan, April 5 1935. G 121, Entry 133, Box 5, [Folder: Post Office – Beverly Hills, California], National Archives Building, College Park, Maryland.

33 RG 121, Entry 130, Boxes 1-2, “Bulletins,” National Archives Building, College Park, Maryland.

34 “Olin Dows Replies to Questions Raised by Mural Painters Group.” *Bulletin: Section of Painting and Sculpture*, n. 7, (December 1935), 3-7, RG 121, Entry 130, Boxes 1-2, “Bulletins,” National Archives Building, College Park, Maryland.

35 *Ibid.*, 4.



Image 11. Santa Barbara Post Office, Santa Barbara, California. An example of the Spanish Colonial regional variation used by the Office of the Supervising Architect. Image courtesy of National Archives, College Park, MD. Record Group 121-BS.

(1) of simple governmental character in consonance with the region in which they are located and the surroundings of the specific sites; (2) materials shall be such as to require no excessive maintenance; and (3) the building shall be of sufficient capacity to reasonably meet the needs of the Federal Government as may be anticipated for a ten- year period.³⁶

In many cases, materials were altered to complement the materiality of the surrounding buildings, also meeting the larger purpose of providing work for local quarries, manufacturers, and laborers. Additionally, the fact that the Prima Donnas designed structures within a region that was familiar to them, allowed them to use regional styles that were fitting to the buildings' locations. Architects who were active in the southwest through their private practice could more easily adapt a standardized post office design to the more regional uses of styles, like Spanish Revival, which would blend with local conditions more than the Colonial Revival of the northeast [Image 11 and 12].

As communities were actively involved in petitioning to receive a post office, many had distinct opinions and were not shy in voicing them. While the vast majority appear to have been happy to allow the government to proceed, a few communities engaged with the Treasury Department over which plot of

³⁶ Lee, *Architects to the Nation*, 262.



Image 12. Mount Kisco Post Office, Mount Kisco, New York. An example of the Colonial Revival regional variation used by the Office of the Supervising Architect. Image courtesy of National Archives, College Park, MD. Record Group 121-BS.

land was most suitable, and others asked for alterations in material, style, or decoration. To their credit, the Treasury Department and the Supervising Architect did their best to assuage communities, even bringing in a local architect of the community's choice on rare occasions. However, in most cases, the community was happy to see the local construction industries at work and welcomed their new post office.

In a similar process, the Section was also extremely focused on the local community. Much of this was due to the ideological framework of the program, and Section administrators went out of their way to adapt projects to local pressures and opinions. Every artist, no matter if they were selected by competition or appointment, was encouraged to visit the site if possible, and at a minimum to engage the postmaster in discussions of community identity, history, and local preferences. Similar to the rare cases of appointing a local architect at the community's behest, the Section occasionally appointed a local artist of the community's choice, but only under exceptional circumstances. However, on a regular basis, the Section sought out involvement from the citizenry and tried to provide each community with a unique work of art that was reflective of its local identity.

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CHAPTER 5

DEFINING THE NEW DEAL ERA

POST OFFICE

OUR MOST IMPORTANT AND STIRRING LINKS WITH THE PAST ARE THE BUILDINGS OF ANCIENT TIME WHICH STAND FOR OUR CONTEMPLATION. ONE OF OUR GREATEST CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE FUTURE MUST BE THE BUILDINGS WHICH WE ERECT NOW FOR THE EYES OF THE COMING GENERATIONS.

I CANNOT BUT FEEL THEREFORE THAT THROUGHOUT THE CYCLE OF YEARS THE SUPERVISING ARCHITECT'S OFFICE HAS PERFORMED AN IMPRESSIVE PUBLIC SERVICE IN ERECTING STRUCTURES WHICH, NOW AND IN THE FUTURE, WILL BE VISIBLE SYMBOLS OF THAT INTANGIBLE THING, THE GOVERNMENT OF THE UNITED STATES.

HENRY MORGANTHAU, JR., 1936

Despite the need for immediate relief, the rhetoric of the era – of the relief organizations, the government, and the people – was concerned with legacy. In an era of perceived impermanence and instability, the idea of creating lasting change was a particularly attractive thought. The post offices of the New Deal were symbolic of this trend in thought; they were built to last, to serve a population in perpetuity, and the art contained within was intended to last as well, illustrating many a community's past and present to its future generations.

Additionally, within the federal building programs of the United States, the post offices of the 1930s are a unique typology. The federal government has undertaken a number of other building programs, yet in their scope, none have been as broad as the post offices. Federal courts and jails are located in a number of cities, but rarely in rural America, federally funded lighthouse construction was limited to select coastal locations, military installations are purpose-built and outside of the public sphere, and the short-lived border station construction of the 1930s only created a small number of stations at key state lines. The fact that over 1,400 post offices were constructed – 1,000 of which contain artwork – demonstrates not only an immediate commitment to temporary relief, but a lasting commitment to continuing public service, making the future of these buildings highly relevant to the continued legacy of not only the postal service, but the values of the nation. While the sheer number of buildings created under this typology is significant when placed in the context of the federal building programs, when the value of their interior Section artwork is included in the assessment of these resources, their significance is even more notable. Today, GSA is tasked with ensuring the continued legacy and symbolism of the federal government in all federal buildings, but, in constructing office buildings and courts, little attention is placed on regional identities, as buildings serve only a federal purpose.¹ No other building program has approached the ideology and spread of the New Deal post office, and it is highly likely that no building program in the United States will pursue this mission again.

This unique quality allows post offices to retain a highly symbolic connection to the legacy of the United States government's actions on behalf of the public in the 1930s. Demonstrating a concern for regional identity, a belief in equal access to public services, and the idea that citizens are entitled to an aesthetically beautiful, cultured environment, these buildings are a crucial remnant of an exceptional moment in American history that is without parallel. The removal of these properties from the public sphere, if not done with greater prudence, may result in the elimination of this important federal legacy; erasing the history of a unique relationship between the federal government and 1,000 communities across the nation.

Today, as these buildings face shortened lives as post offices, the questions of historical significance, of legacy, and preservation, must attempt to resolve the issue of why the nation should work to retain this building type. As stated in the introduction, most – if not all – of these buildings must be adapted to serve other uses if they are to remain in the national landscape. While their value as public infrastructure, as

¹ "Architecture and Government," *United States General Services Administration*, (website) <http://www.gsa.gov/portal/category/25437>

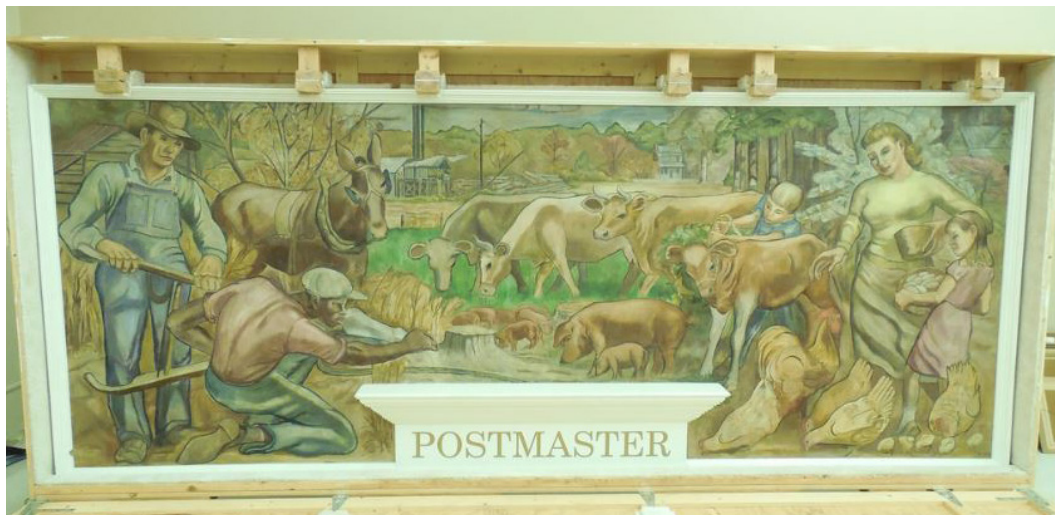


Image 13. "Spring," by Caroline Rohland for the Sylvania Post Office, Sylvania, Georgia. Image courtesy Jimmy Emerson (flickr). Used with the permission of the United States Postal Service®. All rights reserved.

part of a federal building project, their symbolic role in representing a unique moment of American history, their simultaneously regional and national scope, their function as public art galleries for the people, and their role in the history of the United States postal system has been discussed above, the future of these buildings is tied to their ability to express their relevance in a world far distant from the upheaval of the 1930s and a reliance on traditional mail delivery.

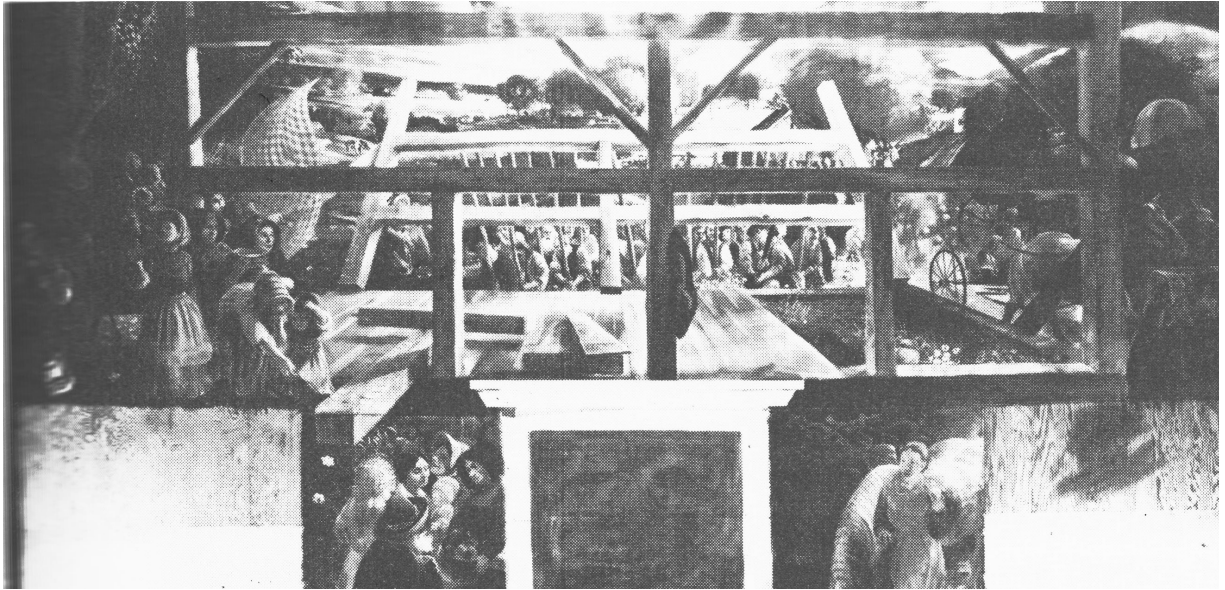
Loci of Community Identity and Federal Service

The use of the building is always coupled with its ability to serve a community; however, identifying these buildings solely as a function of their use, cripples any argument for their relevance today. Today, when the post office as a building is separated from its function as a *post office*, the fact that the building was constructed as public infrastructure, with federal funds, to serve a *public purpose*, becomes its defining characteristic. The specific function of the structure is subservient to the use of the space as a community meeting ground. Therefore, public use – whether or not a building is under private ownership – should be considered an essential component of a structure’s purpose.

Joining Building and Art

In particular, the investment in public art is representative of this commitment to local ideology and community life, and as art was designed to be specific to its site in content, as well as shape and design, the connection between building and art is an important feature to maintain. Many murals were designed to fill the open wall above the Postmaster’s door, and the shape of the mural was fitted around these decorative doorframes, resulting in unusual and non-rectilinear shapes that look unfinished when removed [Image 13]. In addition, some artists capitalized on the controlled perspective of their audience (which was forced to look up at the mural) and played with how two-dimensional surfaces could suggest three-dimensional space. In one example at the Rome Post Office in Rome, New York, artist Wendell Jones painted “Barn

Image 14. "Barn Raising" by Wendell Jones, for the Rome Post Office, Rome, New York. Image courtesy of National Archives, College Park, MD. Record Group 121-CMS.



Raising" to illustrate the activity of erecting the timber framing of a barn.² In the mural, the timber frame, or bent, is positioned as though it supports the wall of the lobby; visually extending the volume of the room through the wall and into the Postmaster's office [Image 14].³ Sadly, the Rome Post Office mural has been removed from its original location and is now housed in the town's city hall, where its visual play on volume is lost without its original context.⁴ While, the postal service has stated that its priority is to retain murals in situ whenever possible, in some cases, buildings are converted to private uses during divestment and a community loses access to the artwork. When a building's use does not allow public access, or no long-term lease agreement is satisfactorily arranged, the USPS moves works to other post office locations within the community, or to other locations with public access, such as municipal buildings.⁵

Daily Presence

One of the defining features of the placement of the Section's artwork was that locations were regularly frequented by the community, making art an accessible element of daily life, not an object that must be sought out to be experienced or reserved for the wealthy. In the case of the Venice Post Office, discussed earlier under long-term lease agreements, the agreement between Joel Silver and the USPS allowed for public access, by appointment, on at least six days of the year. Although the intention was to ensure that the work is still available to interested citizens, the need to express formal interest in order to gain entry effectively eliminated the work from the general public. Few individuals have the ability to stumble across the highly regarded Edward Biberman mural, "The History of Venice," and the work no longer fulfills its goal to actively engage the community.

² Marling, *Wall to Wall America*, 220-1.
³ *Ibid.*, 221.
⁴ "Rome Historical Society and Museum – Rome, NY," *Living New Deal*, <https://livingnewdeal.org/projects/rome-historical-society-museum-rome-ny/>
⁵ Daniel B. Delahaye (Federal Preservation Officer, USPS), in discussion with the author, March 2016.



Image 15. "The Humbletonian Stake" by Georgina Klitgaard for the Goshen Post Office, Goshen, New York. Image courtesy Wikimedia Commons. Used with the permission of the United States Postal Service®. All rights reserved.

Local Identity

Larger issues of community involvement, engagement, and representation are essential in defining the role of the New Deal post office. Artist engagement with the local postmaster and the town population was intended to result in a work that the community could identify with and value. While many post office murals depicted elements of postal history, small town murals, sculptures, and reliefs often depicted more local scenes. In some cases they glorified the tales of local heroes, of diligent mail carriers who delivered through the great storms of the centuries, or the town patriarchs, frozen in a moment of discovery, luck, or sudden change; embodying significant stories of American folk life. In other cases, local industries and the laborer or farmer were featured prominently to display a regional identity and the glory and dignity of industry.

Section artists were told to propose designs based on the history of the mail, the "American Scene," or themes of labor, and while some were left to discover the stories they wished to depict, some communities became highly involved in discussions of topic, style, and representation, occasionally resenting an artist's depiction of the town or pleading for the Section to allow the artist to depict a popular local topic. In the case of Goshen, New York, artist Georgina Klitgaard faced strong resistance from the Section when she portrayed the community's most popular activity, horseracing. The citizens of Goshen had to petition the Section's leadership through a letter writing campaign, highlighting the town's role in the development of harness racing and the importance of racing as a community event.⁶ Klitgaard was ultimately allowed to proceed, despite the Section's belief that racing was an unseemly and inappropriate topic for mural painting [Image 15].⁷

⁶ Marling, *Wall to Wall America*, 53.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.



Image 16. Pacific Grove Post Office, Pacific Grove, California, 1938. Image courtesy of National Archives, College Park, MD. Record Group 121-BS.



Image 17. Pacific Grove Post Office, California, 2016. Image courtesy of Mark Bruno.

The Postmaster was often the artist's most important contact to test local preferences, gather local knowledge, or discuss popular local history. In the case of Pacific Grove, California, artist Victor Arnautoff first spoke with members of the Chamber of Commerce and then with the Postmaster [Image 16 and 17]. While the first conversation resulted in the suggestion of the "Butterfly Tree" – Pacific Grove is an important location for the Monarch butterfly migration, and butterflies are known to cluster en masse at Pacific Grove's Monarch Grove Sanctuary – further discussion with the Postmaster resulted in the choice of a local beach, "Lover's Point," as the subject of the mural. In a letter to the Section in January 1940, Arnautoff justifies his choice of local landscape over the more popular topics of industry or local folklore, by asserting that "Pacific Grove is a small resort town, populated with people who had retired, and tourists. It was definitely



Image 18. "Lover's Point" by Victor Arnautoff, Pacific Grove Post Office, California, 2016. Image courtesy of Mark Bruno. Used with the permission of the United States Postal Service®.

stated to me that there are no industries at Pacific Grove and they do not want any industries put as subject matter in the mural."⁸

The most common critiques of Section art at the time revolved around the idea of the "other;" either "it doesn't look like that here," or "we don't do it that way," or "the characters look too foreign." If a community could not see itself reflected in the artist's work, they were unhappy, claiming that they had been misrepresented or the work was not local enough in scope. Even Arnautoff's beach scene raised the ire of a local journalist who, under the title "That New Picture in the Post Office Worries Us," claimed that the mural was "entirely foreign to the architectural style of the building and [...] It sticks out like a sore thumb."⁹ Even the Postmaster expressed his dismay to Arnautoff that the topography of Lover's Point in the mural was not more distinctly like the Lover's Point of reality [Image 18].¹⁰ Yet today, many of these arguments have been forgotten and except in the few cases where art has been removed due to offensive content or inaccurate versions of history that have lost public approval, the art has remained in place. Generations have passed through these structures, and because the buildings were constructed to last, they have remained largely unchanged.

In *Wall to Wall America*, Marling briefly states that community involvement in the theme, content, and critique of Section murals that depicted their local identity and history was an act of faith in the future. The people were willing to invest time and energy in ensuring the accuracy of the work because they believed that their community had a future; in Marling's words, "the post office mural was their collective

8 Victor Arnautoff to Forbes Watson, January 19, 1946 [misdated, should be 1940], RG 121, Entry 133. National Archives Building, College Park, Maryland.

9 "That New Picture in the Post Office Worries Us," *Tide*, April 5, 1940. RG 121, Entry 133. National Archives Building, College Park, Maryland.

10 Arnautoff to Rowan, April 4, 1940, RG 121, Entry 133. National Archives Building, College Park, Maryland.

act of faith in tomorrow.”¹¹ The uncertainty of the era, with mass migration, unemployment, and financial destitution made planning for the future out of reach of the average citizen, yet with the actions of the federal government, communities were able to invest psychologically in discussions of identity and history that tied people to place. In addition to the idea that individuals were gambling on the future of their towns, and taking Marling’s interpretation one step further, the federal government was taking part in that same act of faith, providing infrastructure to stabilize and serve towns, while engaging with how to best influence the average citizen. In a recurring quote used in Section publications to illustrate the positive response to the Section’s work, the appeal is made by a Postmaster, “In behalf of the many smaller cities, wholly without objects of art, as ours was, may I beseech the Treasury to give them some art, more of it, wherever you find it possible to do so. How can a finished citizen be made in an artless town?”¹² From the perspective of this one postmaster, the addition of art provided much more than an aesthetic influence on the town, but was responsible for the creation of “finished,” well-rounded citizens; further educating the town about its history, culture, and national identity.

The Loss of the Cultural Commons

More is at stake than the transference of capital. The buildings and artwork of the USPS embody and maintain a collective memory of government largesse that many seem anxious to forget. Often local in nature, New Deal murals are intimately tied to the under-documented history of small towns, encouraging a sense of civic pride in places that are too economically underdeveloped to be graced by the aesthetic luxury of a high-end art market.¹³

Today, the concept of the cultural commons is gaining traction in discussions around the legacy of federal projects. Due to the funding of work with federal money, raised through the taxation of the people, these buildings, and the artwork contained within, are believed to be included in the cultural resources held in trust by the government, for its citizens, much like federal parks and monuments.

The tragedy of the commons, upon which the idea of ‘cultural commons’ is based, is a reference to the economic theory that shared-resources will be depleted by all participants acting in their own self-interest.¹⁴ Much like how the use of the traditional town commons requires some regulation to keep it a viable grazing ground for the community’s livestock, the resources of the federal government need regulatory control to ensure that they maintain their purpose of serving the public and providing resources in perpetuity. Regulation at this level prevents government agencies from acting in their self-interest and benefiting from the sale or use of these cultural resources to the detriment of future generations.

11 Marling, *Wall to Wall America*, 210.

12 Basil V. Jones (Postmaster of Pleasant Hills, MO) to the Treasury Department, June 6, 1939. RG 121, Entry 133. National Archives Building, College Park, Maryland.

13 R.H. Lossin, “Why the Post Office Matters,” *Jacobin*, (October 2, 2015), <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/10/usps-bronx-privatization-murals-new-deal-art/>

14 Originally expressed in W. F. Lloyd, *Two Lectures on the Checks to Population* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, England, 1833); Popularized by Garrett Hardin, “The Tragedy of the Commons,” *Science*, 162, 3859, (December 13, 1968), 1243-1248.

In order to fully group the New Deal era's creations within the cultural commons, it is important to return to the intention of the era. The New Deal was created to effect a particular result: to pull the nation out of the Great Depression. FDR's legislation pushed for a return to normalcy, but also aimed to make Americans aware of their right to engage with American culture through art, literature, and music. At the dedication of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., in March of 1941, FDR stated:

There was a time when the people of this country would not have thought that the inheritance of art belonged to them or that they had responsibilities to guard it. A few generations ago, the people of this country were often taught by their writers and by their critics and by their teachers to believe that art was something foreign to America and to themselves—something imported from another continent, something from an age which was not theirs—something they had no part in, save to go to see it in some guarded room on holidays or Sundays.

But recently, within the last few years—yes, in our lifetime—they have discovered that they have a part. They have seen in their own towns, in their own villages, in schoolhouses, in post offices, in the back rooms of shops and stores, pictures painted by their sons, their neighbors—people they have known and lived beside and talked to. They have seen, across these last few years, rooms full of painting and sculpture by Americans, walls covered with painting by Americans—some of it good, some of it not so good, but all of it native, human, eager, and alive— all of it painted by their own kind in their own country, and painted about things that they know and look at often and have touched and loved.

In this context, where the aim was to create broad interaction between communities and cultural resources expressive of local identity, it is difficult to endorse the loss of these places and works today. FDR's message of access, expanded understanding, and cultural growth, is clear in its intention as a lasting gift to the people, and an important aspect of his presidential legacy.

While significant debate around the sale of the post offices as a loss to the cultural commons has been present in contemporary publications, articles, and interviews, the fact that the divestment of federal property is a long-standing procedure means that the process will continue unless some legislative change is undergone. Yet, with the sale of the buildings, the artwork is often removed from the active, daily life of the community that it was intended to benefit. This separation between original intention and current treatment, is what threatens the value of the cultural commons. In the words of Steve Hutkins, "If you think of the post offices as something like a public park, the public owns those parks. It's akin to selling the parks and turning them into golf courses."¹⁵

The controversy around the role of Section artwork has also seen increased scrutiny as the conditions around the transfer of the artwork from GSA to the USPS was carried out differently than the USPS's method of transferring property today, and poses substantial issues for creating well-defined procedures around the treatment of art. In the 1970s, as a consequence of the Postal Reorganization Act, GSA signed over all properties to the USPS that were utilized over fifty-five percent by postal activities.¹⁶ According to

¹⁵ Quoted from, R.H. Lossin, "Erasing History at the USPS," *Daily JSTOR*, (August 19, 2015), <http://daily.jstor.org/usps-post-office-murals/>

¹⁶ United States General Services Administration, "Fine Arts Policies and Procedures," (2009), 12, 88. ; available at http://www.gsa.gov/graphics/pbs/Fine_Arts_Policies_and_Procedures_2009_w101409.pdf

conversations with GSA and the USPS, the artwork was transferred along with each building as an appurtenance included in the definition of the property.¹⁷ Yet today, the USPS states that the artwork is no longer considered one of the appurtenances of the building at the time of sale, and is retained as a separate asset. This difference in definition of the artwork as an ‘asset’ versus an ‘appurtenance’ creates questions around the validity of the original property transfer, and, additionally, calls into question whether at the time of the Postal Reorganization Act, it was understood that the act would have significant ramifications on the future divestment of historic properties or the treatment of New Deal era artwork.

The situation is further complicated by the fact that since the 1970s, when GSA began to inventory all of its holdings created under the New Deal, it has been determined that all works – whether under the control of GSA or in private hands – are still legally owned by GSA, as artwork cannot be sold or transferred out of GSA’s control.¹⁸ Many works of art – particularly the small paintings, prints, and sculptures created under Federal Project Number One – were sold or ‘rescued’ from poor conditions by concerned citizens, who may have spent both time and money to restore the object, and believed that they were assisting in preserving a piece of art for the next generation. These concerned citizens have since been informed that no federally commissioned works can be held in private collections and all are still legally owned by GSA, whether or not GSA has demonstrated an adequate standard of care.

The fact that GSA holds that all artwork created by artists under contract with the federal government remains under its ownership and is part of the national body of federally-owned art that is unable to be sold or exchanged, casts doubt on the adequacy of the property transfer agreement between GSA and the USPS to include art. While the property remains under federal ownership while held by the USPS, the USPS’s method of interpreting that ownership remains an issue when the works are known to be cultural artifacts created for the people. Although the modern interpretation of asset and property ownership by the USPS is largely in keeping with broad privatization of property and changes in ideology since the 1930s, this perspective demonstrates the enormous difference in the ethos of the federal-public relationship during the Great Depression with that of today.

GSA has been much more successful in the public’s eyes as a steward of the public commons, due in part to the rhetorical framework that it operates within. GSA expresses its role as an archivist and curator of the federal government’s art collection which is “maintained by GSA as a part of our national and cultural heritage,” held in trust for the people as a part in the cultural commons of the nation.¹⁹ In contrast, the USPS’s determination of its private property ownership over these federally commissioned works has caused it to limit or prohibit the photography of artwork by the public. Although the USPS states that “At the discretion of the local Postmaster, the U.S. Postal Service allows individuals to take low resolution photographs of New Deal Art from public areas of Post Office facilities as long as no disruption is caused,” numerous New Deal post office enthusiasts have the shared experience of being told by postal service

¹⁷ Appurtenances also included equipment, furnishings, light fixtures, etc.; US GSA, “Fine Arts Policies and Procedures,” 104.
¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 102.

¹⁹ United States General Services Administration, “The Fine Arts Program,” www.gsa.gov/finearts

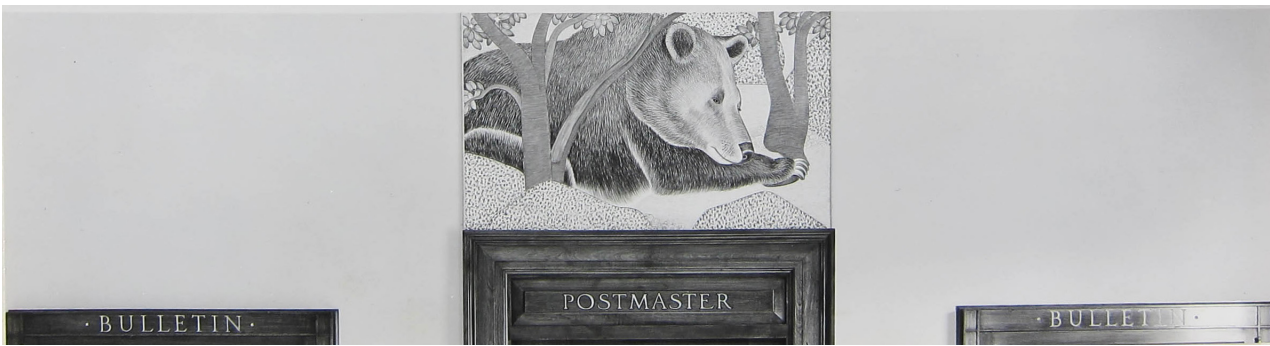


Image 19. "Mother Bear" by Helen K. Forbes for the Monrovia Post Office, California. Image courtesy of National Archives, College Park.

employees to desist in photographing the murals and sculptures that they visit.²⁰ Even when photographs are taken, images reproduced for non-commercial use must include an image credit that includes: "Used with the permission of the United States Postal Service®. All rights reserved."²¹ This difference in treatment and interpretation between the private property ownership by an independent federal agency and the public ownership of the nation's art as stewarded by GSA, is an issue that needs to be legally clarified.

While it is understandable that GSA would be hesitant to assert continuing ownership of an additional body of federal art that has not been fully inventoried and would greatly add to the challenges that the agency already faces in locating and providing care for the thousands of works under its jurisdiction, the fact that this issue has ramifications to the public enjoyment of artwork, and the national understanding of what constitutes the cultural commons, makes it an essential issue for clarification.

Curating, Inventorying, and Monitoring Post Office Artwork

The USPS has recently worked to develop an approach to locating, inventorying, and determining the condition of the large collection of art still housed in its post offices to create a more thorough record of its holdings.²² Here the USPS has stated that GSA provides an important example of the best practices to actively locate, curate, and monitor vast artistic holdings, and hopes to assemble a record of the artwork under USPS ownership comparable to that created over the last forty years by GSA regarding its own holdings.

Yet, in the over seventy years that have passed since the end of the New Deal, a number of murals and sculptures have gone missing or have been destroyed. In Monrovia, California, the 2004 rediscovery of a mural depicting four bear cubs, painted by Helen Katherine Forbes, which had been believed missing since the renovation of the post office in 1964, led to the work's restoration and its return to the city in 2009.²³ However, the other mural in the set "Mother Bear" is still missing and is known only through surviving photographs [Image 19]. In other cases, fire, theft, and misplacement, have resulted in the loss of a number of murals and the USPS has recognized a need to maintain a more thorough inventory of its collection to better protect these remarkable assets of the nation and the USPS.

²⁰ United States Postal Service. "New Deal Art: Murals and Sculptures," <https://about.usps.com/doing-business/rights-permissions/new-deal-art.htm>

²¹ Ibid.

²² Daniel B. Delahaye (Federal Preservation Officer, USPS), in discussion with the author, March 2016.

²³ "History and Heritage," City of Monrovia, California, <http://www.cityofmonrovia.org/library/page/history-and-heritage>

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CHAPTER 6

ILLUSTRATING LIFE AFTER DIVESTMENT: CASE STUDIES

NOW WE HAVE THIS CURIOUS LOCAL SITUATION WHERE WE'RE ASKED TO ALSO
PRIVATIZE OUR SPATIAL RELATIONSHIP TO OUR HISTORIC LANDMARK — AND UPON WHAT BASIS?
[IF] SPECIAL ACCOMMODATIONS FOR SUCH BUSINESSES CAUSE US TO COMPROMISE WHO WE ARE,
CAN WE DEEM THEM APPROPRIATE?

JOURNALIST, *SANTA MONICA DAILY PRESS*, 2015

Any discussion regarding the possible future of the New Deal post offices must examine the ways in which these buildings have already been reinvented, reinterpreted, or removed from the national landscape. The case studies outlined below attempt to offer a broad spectrum of examples that illustrate everything from private to public reuse, and from subtle alteration to extreme change.

Outlining a number of the examples below allows for greater reflection on what uses are compatible with the history and the future of these structures. The cases, which act as vignettes of a variety of conditions, allow one to understand how reuse has or has not addressed the interplay between art and architecture, the enunciation of public memory through artwork, the integration of that artwork into daily life, and the public service program of the building. In short, the case studies are meant to ask: under what conditions are these properties best integrated into modern life, while symbolically retaining the significance of their past? While many questions should be considered, the following offer a jumping-off point. Can private ownership offer the same benefits to the revitalization of these properties as maintaining the public ownership of these structures? What factors create the ideal conditions under which these properties can be understood as a national type or as individual sites of community value? and, under what conditions can community involvement with these resources flourish?

Divestments since the 1970s Resulting in Demolition

Although in recent years the demolition of historic post offices has been quite rare, these buildings are still at risk of aggressive redevelopment. The instances illustrated below provide a background on some of the issues that can lead to the loss of these structures; although the examples discussed do not represent the only instances of demolition.

The Atlantic Station Post Office, in Virginia Beach, Virginia, was sold to Walgreens in 2008, and although a Walgreens' spokesman claimed that reuse options were considered, the final determination was that "the old building can't be converted to a modern business use and especially a state of the art drug store."¹ The company immediately applied for demolition permits despite opposition from local citizens, businesses, and city officials. Local newspaper coverage at the time quoted Mac Rawls, chairman of the Virginia Beach Historic Preservation Commission, who stated: "We have absolutely no leverage as a city, over what they can do. And that's a shame. We'd really like a chance to discuss adaptive reuse of that building. [...] I don't think swapping historical architecture for Walgreens architecture is a good trade."² Yet, despite attempts to list the building on the National Register of Historic Places, or discuss possible reuse options, the building was razed in September of 2009.³ The 1939 Section mural, "Old Dominion

1 For the date of sale, refer to: Fielding Lewis Tyler, "Scratch Another Historic Building ... For a Walgreens?" *The Keeper* (a publication of the Virginia Beach Maritime Museum), (Spring 2009), <http://www.oldcoastguardstation.com/pdf/keeperspring09.pdf>; for the quote from a Walgreens spokesman, refer to: Rita Frankenberry, "Old Post Office Will Be Razed for Walgreens' Site," *The Virginian-Pilot* (online), (March 26, 2009), http://pilotonline.com/news/local/old-post-office-will-be-razed-for-walgreens-site/article_268aa6e3-69ad-5227-8cb7-63ec889eb7aa.html

2 Frankenberry, "Old Post Office Will Be Razed for Walgreens' Site."

3 Patrick Wilson, "Photos: Demolition Starts at Atlantic Station Post Office." *The Virginian-Pilot* (online), (September 10,

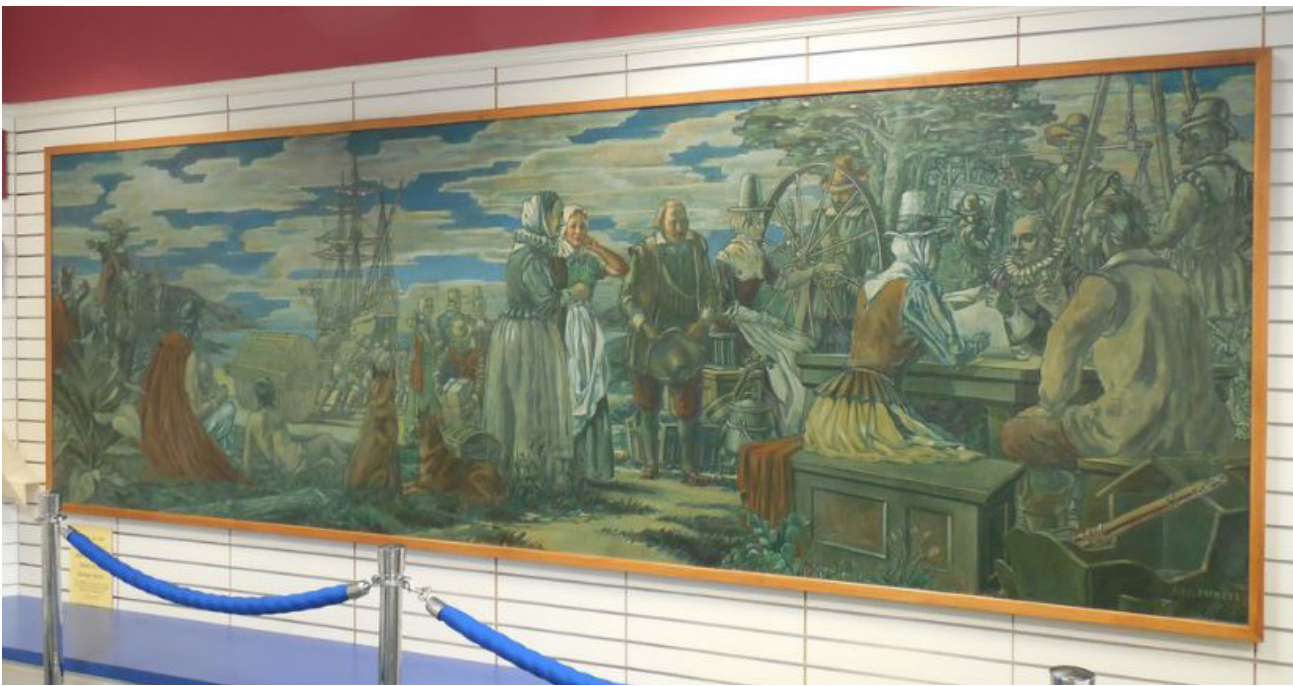


Image 20. "Old Dominion Conversation Piece," by John H.R. Pickett, for the Atlantic Station Post Office, Virginia Beach, Virginia. Now relocated. Used with the permission of the United States Postal Service®.

Conversation Piece," by John H.R. Pickett, was removed, restored, and relocated to a nearby post office, constructed in the 1970s [Image 20].⁴

Atlantic Station is particularly interesting as the limited coverage of the incident included mention of community dissent, a local preference for reuse, and concern over the future of the artwork that was displaced by the sale. This post office location had been on the market as early as 2005, many years before the issue of post office divestments received wide coverage on the national level, and therefore provides an early example of how one of the USPS's sales resulted in a disastrous outcome for the preservation of these buildings. The building was nearly seventy years old at the time of sale, and therefore eligible for the National Register based on age alone. In addition to its age, the presence of Section art should have initiated Section 106 review. If Section 106 was undertaken in this instance, no evidence of the results of that process is apparent and the USPS ultimately failed in providing any protection for one of its historic properties. With the increased focus on divestment processes and the use of stronger preservation covenants by the USPS, the razing of these properties is increasingly rare. However, Atlantic Station is a reminder of the need for even the simplest protective measures, without which many more of these federally funded buildings can be razed by a new owner.

An earlier example than Atlantic Station is that of the Derry Post Office in New Hampshire. The Derry Post Office was sold in 2002 and was razed for the construction of another national chain drugstore, CVS. This historic post office, which since 1972 had been owned by the town and served as the town hall, contained a 1938 plaster relief by New York artist and Russian immigrant Vladimir Yoffe, entitled "The Town of Derry."⁵ The three-panel relief depicts important moments in the history of Derry, including "the planting

2009), http://pilotonline.com/news/photos-demolition-starts-at-atlantic-station-post-office/article_8e576029-bf90-55d0-82e5-c30e16d82b67.html

4 Cyndi Kight, "'Conversation Piece' is now the talk of Princess Anne," *The Virginian-Pilot* (online), (August 30, 2009).

5 Park and Markowitz, *Democratic Vistas*, 217.

of the first potato,” “turning flax into linen,” and “communicating and growing.”⁶ When a new municipal building was built, and the artwork was temporarily moved to the new building, the town put the historic post office on the market, selling it to CVS in 2002. Although the USPS was still involved in decisions regarding the display and treatment of the artwork – which was ultimately restored and relocated in 2004 to the Art Center at Pinkerton Academy, a private high school – the future of the building was the sole responsibility of the town administration.⁷ The town’s choice to sell the building may or may not have included knowledge of the new owner’s intention to raze the structure, but the Derry case raises many questions regarding the ability to truly secure the future of these structures once they pass out of federal ownership.

Local Landmark Regulations

One of the methods of protecting these historic resources lies in the use of local landmark legislation. Particularly, as listing on the National Register only provides for regulatory review when federal funding is involved, new, non-federal owners have a great deal of freedom in the treatment of their buildings. While preservation covenants provide protection to historic materials, the owner still has discretion over the treatment of the property as a whole and is able to alter the building’s relationship to the street with little infringement on the stipulations of the covenant. Therefore, as in the treatment of all landmark properties, local landmarking provides the most regulatory oversight.

However, the role of local preservation ordinances is highly restricted at the time of USPS divestment. Due to ownership by the federal government, post offices are not eligible to be landmarked locally. While some cities have gone ahead and landmarked federally-owned structures, it is understood that the designations are largely symbolic and would not be legally binding if challenged by the federal organization that holds the title, as a locality cannot legally restrict the federal government. Therefore, if a local landmarks commission is concerned about the future presence of and possible alterations to their community’s post office, they are only able to list a structure after the building has been sold. In Santa Monica, California, the city’s Landmarks Commission designated the 1938 Santa Monica Post Office as a landmark in April of 2014, following the closure of the structure in June of 2013 [Image 21].⁸ The new owner, Skydance Productions, proposed an initial treatment for the property that included enclosing the area with an eight foot fence, and justified the height by stating that “famous people frequenting the premises would have to fend off paparazzi, and [...] the building still said ‘United States Post Office’ on its historic front façade,

which would inevitably attract people.”⁹ This unsympathetic treatment, which belies any understanding of

6 “*Town of Derry, (1938)*” [Plaque accompanying the display of Vladimir Yoffe’s reliefs at the Arts Center, Pinkerton Academy, Derry, NH (photograph)], <https://www.flickr.com/photos/auvet/4861139820/in/photostream/>

7 Michael Brindley, “Historical Mural Finds New Home,” *Derby News*, (n.d.); “*Town of Derry, (1938)*” (photograph), <https://www.flickr.com/photos/auvet/4861139820/in/photostream/>

8 City of Santa Monica Landmarks Commission, “Findings and Determination of the Landmarks Commission of the City of Santa Monica in the Matter of the Designation of a Landmark,” *City of Santa Monica*, [http://www.smgov.net/departments/PCD/agendas/Landmarks-Commission/2014/20140403/\(5-B\)%20STOA%2014LM-002%20\(1248%205th%20Street\)%20\(April%202014\).pdf](http://www.smgov.net/departments/PCD/agendas/Landmarks-Commission/2014/20140403/(5-B)%20STOA%2014LM-002%20(1248%205th%20Street)%20(April%202014).pdf)

9 While not mentioned in the Santa Monica case, the fact that post offices offer a mixing ground for all citizens was seen as a benefit historically. This most notably was cited in conversations around the Beverly Hills Post Office, which was known



Image 21. Santa Monica Post Office, Santa Monica, California. Image courtesy of *The New York Times* (“Postal Service Looks to Sell Historic Buildings.” March 2013).

the structure’s history as a place of public access on a prominent corner in the heart of downtown, angered preservationists and community members and reinforced the valuable role of strong local landmark regulations. At the time that the perimeter fence was initially proposed, a local journalist asked many of the questions that are constantly raised in the debates around the relationship between communities and their historic resources.

Historically, the post office has been surrounded by an open-air plaza, open to the public. Soon, the new Plaza at Santa Monica project across Arizona [Avenue] will be considered by the City Council. If approved in some form, it’s designed to attract a large number of pedestrians along Arizona, right across the street from the post office. [...] Now we have this curious local situation where we’re asked to also privatize our spatial relationship to our historic landmark – and upon what basis? The fence proposal is tone deaf to the symbolism of the private capturing of public assets. It’s rationale to protect the few from the many would fence off from the people the results of a historic public works program that helped get us out of the Great Depression. There is a point at which businesses seeking to locate in Santa Monica need to fit with our community vision – or be out of place. Alternatively, if special accommodations for such businesses cause us to compromise who we are, can we deem them appropriate?¹⁰

as a place where famous actors could be seen picking up their mail.; Michael Feinstein, “Return to Sender,” *Santa Monica Daily Press*, (September 29, 2015), <http://smdp.com/return-sender/151028>.

¹⁰ Ibid.



Image 22. Ralph Nader speaks at a community protest at the Berkeley Post Office, Berkeley, California. Image courtesy of *BerkeleySide* ("Ralph Nader Speaks at Rally to Save Post Office," 2014).

The Santa Monica Landmarks Commission approved the erection of the fence after Skydance agreed to lower it to five feet, from the originally proposed eight feet, and to make it visually permeable to allow pedestrians to view the historic structure from the street. However, the decision has remained controversial and in March of 2016, at a hearing on variances for the reuse proposal that came before the Planning Commission, the issue of the fence continued to draw criticism from the community and the planning commission.¹¹ Due to the fact that the Santa Monica Post Office does not contain interior artwork, the lobby was not included in the local landmark designation (yet does remain partially protected through the building's preservation covenant), and the reuse of the structure does not require continued public access. Skydance argued that the need to maintain the historic post office sign on the façade has resulted in constant attempts by the public to access the structure and Landmarks Commissioner John Berley described this issue as the trade-off that resulted in the commission's approval of the fence.¹² Despite the fact that the fence has been officially approved, continuing dissatisfaction has resulted in numerous statements from planning commissioners urging Skydance to rethink its proposal and to be more mindful of the historical role of the building and the values expressed by the community.

11 Jonathan Friedman, "Commissioners, Former Mayor Irked by Fence Planned for Santa Monica Post Office Remodeling Project," *Santa Monica Lookout*, (March 17, 2016), http://www.surfsantamonica.com/ssm_site/the_lookout/news/News-2016/March-2016/03_17_2016_Commissioners_Former_Mayor_Irked_by_Fence_Planned_for_Santa_Monica_Post_Office_Remodeling_Project.html

12 *Ibid.*



Image 23. Berkeley Post Office, built in 1915, with interior murals and bas reliefs added with TRAP funding in 1937. Berkeley, California. Image courtesy of *The Daily Californian*, 2014.

Recent Closures and Contemporary Community Protests

In the absence of available data on divestment cases from the 1970s through 2009, it is difficult to authoritatively state the role of community protest in this process. While the widely perceived threat to post offices across the nation in 2009 resulted in significant community outcry, the fact that little media attention was focused on divestment prior to this, makes looking at the larger trends more challenging. The protests of more recent years provide a number of reasons that communities are concerned over the loss of these structures, helping to frame the greater context.

Recent divestments, particularly in California where historical post offices have been statistically more likely to be threatened with sale than in any other state, have seen quick community mobilization.¹³ Although the Berkeley, California Post Office was built prior to the New Deal, in 1915, it houses New Deal art, and the citizens of Berkeley have been among the most active nationwide in opposing the USPS's planned closure of their local facility [Image 22 and 23]. Since 2012, protests and litigation have shaped the conversation.

One of the most interesting aspects of the Berkeley case is that the community originally stood staunchly for the continuation of postal services at this location. Maintaining historical use and continuing to serve the community were paramount, and the city and the National Trust for Historic Preservation were

13 The states with the highest frequency of divestment are California and Connecticut. It is believed that the high real estate values in both of these states are the driving force behind the choice of these locations for divestment.

Image 24. Ukiah Post Office, Ukiah, California, 1937. Image courtesy of National Archives, College Park, MD. Record Group 121-BS.



active in litigating to prevent the sale of the building to a developer. The questions around the Berkeley Post Office have helped to shape discussions regarding the post office as a federally-funded piece of public infrastructure that is part of the cultural commons. By making parallels between obligations to local communities and the role of the government in securing the nation's natural and cultural treasures, the post office can be discussed as a unique element of national heritage. However, when the argument is couched in federal obligation of continued service versus sale based on fiscal responsibilities and private ownership, neither side is able to find common ground; stalling proceedings and leaving the architecturally, culturally, and artistically significant Berkeley Post Office in limbo, neither able to serve the community effectively, nor able to receive the maintenance and care that it needs.

Although many communities have protested the closure of their post offices, few, if any, have experienced the publicity, resources, and involvement seen in Berkeley. A more typical case of community involvement that still resulted in closure, can be seen in the experience of Ukiah, California.

The Ukiah Post Office was closed in January 2012 amid strong community protest [Image 24]. Over 5,000 signatures were collected to petition for the retention of the post office as a post office, and much of the rhetoric from the community revolved around the role of the post office as an important cornerstone of community life. Even the involvement of Congressman Mike Thompson (CA-1) was unable to provide the community with greater bargaining power.¹⁴ Barry Vogel, an attorney who worked with the community to keep the building open, was quoted as expressing a visceral reaction to news of the closure, "It's despicable. These closures take the guts out of local communities, subjugating us so that we become

¹⁴ "Rep. Mike Thompson Urges U.S. Postal Service to Recognize Ukiah Post Office's Historic Significance, (Press Release)," *U.S. Congressman Mike Thompson*, (April 8, 2012), <http://mikethompson.house.gov/newsroom/press-releases/rep-mike-thompson-urges-us-postal-service-to-recognize-ukiah-post-offices>



Image 25. "Resources of the Soil" by Benjamin Cunningham for the Ukiah Post Office. Used with the permission of the United States Postal Service®. All rights reserved.

less free. We have fewer services and it makes life more difficult for hard-working people who have used this post office for 75 years."¹⁵

The post office's last day was marked by ceremonies; the community gathered at the building, exchanged stories about the role of the post office in their daily lives, and sang an adapted version of *Red River Valley* to bid a final "adieu" to the building that had been a feature of their downtown for decades.¹⁶ Many of the memories shared that day highlighted the early days of the post office, with stories of the first postmaster (who was hit by lightning), and the importance of the mail during the Second World War.¹⁷ The closing ceremonies illustrated the importance of the building as a touchstone of community memory, and a catalyst for the expression of oral histories.

Although these stories are expressive of an older generation, a generation that relied on the mail in a way that is not possible today, these stories illustrate the ability of a structure to allow that history to reach a broader audience. The experience at Ukiah illustrated the active engagement among community members and between citizens and the federal government through a single central institution. While the vivid memories of older generations can be written off as tales of a bygone era, it seems that the lesson that it would be wiser to take away is that a place can create public involvement and nurture community. As the federal government continues to limit funding to public programming, cultural institutions, and public infrastructure, the loss of built fabric for community involvement represents a substantial impact on the ability of future generations to experience this type of public sphere infrastructure. Today, the structures where community

¹⁵ Carole Brodsky, "A First Class Farewell." *Ukiah Daily Journal*, (online), (January 10, 2012), <http://www.ukiahdailyjournal.com/general-news/20120110/a-first-class-farewell>

¹⁶ "Come and sit by our side if you love us, / Do not hasten to bid us Adieu, / But remember the downtown merchants, / And the West Side who loved you so true."; Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

life unfolds will not be the post office where citizens travel daily to gather their mail. However, the fact that these structures can be reused to effect that purpose is an opportunity that should not be taken lightly.

After the closure of the post office, the Ukiah community was still active, vocal, and apprehensive about the future of the property. The quick reuse of the building was the greatest issue, and the feeling that the building would remain vacant and unused, affecting the foot traffic and activity of Ukiah's town center, was disheartening to a community that had seen their central business district negatively impacted by the recession of 2008. The sale itself in August of 2012, to a company listed as Steam Studio, LLC in Fort Bragg, California, for \$620,000, actually helped to assuage concerns that the USPS would have allowed the property to sit vacant.¹⁸ However, the new owner has yet to take steps to revitalize the building, and the community's fear of a prolonged vacancy has come true.

Concern was also placed on the community's ability to access the 1938 Benjamin Cunningham mural, "Resources of the Soil" [Image 25]. At the time of the mural's completion, the town's Postmaster wrote to the Section to praise the work, stating,

The mural has been pronounced very beautiful by the limited number of Ukiah citizens and visitors competent to judge it. Those who have criticized it unfavorably have done so in a jocular manner and in like jocular vein I have pointed out to them the fact that they never saw a mural before and that they are merely exposing their "ignorance."

The photographs do not do it justice. Even those who have criticized it acknowledge that the coloring is superb, and as they become more accustomed to it and to the idea that it is symbolic in subject matter they are going to like it and appreciate it more and more. It is a very pleasing addition to the decoration of the building. [...]

Ukiah is very proud that this post office should have been selected for the installation of one of the works of so eminent and able an artist as Mr. Cunningham.¹⁹

While the sale of the building was still being finalized, some members of the community expressed their desire to see that the mural remain in a public setting. As early as August of 2012, the USPS's then preservation officer Dallen Wordekemper, assured Ukiah that "The mural will come back to the community."²⁰ A chairwomen on the Ukiah Planning Commission, Judy Pruden, who is also a town historian, discussed with a reporter the various locations where the mural could be relocated to remain in a civic building and to allow for broad community access. Within this discussion, the recent long-term lease agreement between Joel Silver and the USPS, regarding the Edward Biberman mural at the Venice Post Office, was used as an example of the negative effects of leaving the work in situ. Although the mural could be left in its original

18 Glenda Anderson, "Old Ukiah Post Office Becoming Eyesore." *The Press Democrat* (online), (November 17, 2013), <http://www.pressdemocrat.com/news/2224800-181/old-ukiah-post-office-becoming>

19 E.P. Thurston (Postmaster of Ukiah, California) to the Section of Fine Arts, January 27, 1939, RG 121-CMS, Prints: Completed Murals and Sculptures, Box 1, Folder: California, Department of Still Pictures, National Archives Building, College Park, Maryland.

20 Glenda Anderson, "Postal Service Promises Work will return to town after Restoration." *The Press Democrat* (online), (August 29, 2012), <http://www.pressdemocrat.com/news/2305341-181/postal-service-promises-work-will?ref=related>



Image 26. Ukiah Post Office, condition as of early 2016. Image courtesy of Jacquelyn McCormick.

location, Ukiah placed more value in allowing the mural to remain in the daily life of the public, and found that the six days of access provided to the Venice, California mural were wholly inadequate in continuing the legacy and intention of the Section's art program.

A number of conversations between the USPS and Ukiah have centered on creating the best conditions for the return of the Cunningham mural to the town following the completed restoration by the Chicago firm, Parma Conservation.²¹ Early talks discussed proper display conditions, including whether displaying the work under plexiglass would cause harmful levels of condensation. The issue of displaying works under glass or plexiglass has been discussed in a number of communities, and where the mural is within easy reach of visitors this has occasionally been approved as a protective measure; however, in most cases, it is preferable that the work remains uncovered to avoid moisture buildup. In Ukiah, a local newspaper claimed that one condition under discussion was the need to keep the mural at a seventy-two degree constant temperature in the mural's new location. However, a USPS employee states that this was never a condition of the mural's return, and is not a measure that is asked for in any of the standard long-term lease agreements.²² This difference in information available within the community and from the USPS illustrates the problematic disconnect in communication around the future of the mural.

In April of 2016, the Ukiah post office still sits vacant, surrounded by a chain-link fence, and the mural, which has been restored, has not yet returned to the community, remaining in storage at Parma Conservation [Image 26]. Due to the expressed wishes of the building owner, and the preference of the USPS to retain murals in situ, the fact that no redevelopment proposal for the building has been proposed has resulted in the inability of the agreement discussion to move forward. Yet, in April 2016, discussions between the

²¹ Justine Frederiksen, "Ukiah Tries Again to Bring Back Post Office Mural," *Ukiah Daily Journal* (online), (February 17, 2015), <http://www.ukiahdailyjournal.com/article/NP/20150217/NEWS/150219928>

²² Daniel B. Delahaye (Federal Preservation Officer, USPS), in discussion with the author, April 2016.

USPS and the building's owner resumed and due to the owner's desire to place the vacant structure back on the market, the USPS hopes to arrive at an interim-lease agreement that will allow the mural to return to the town until the building can be restored.²³

Although every community reacts in a different way, and emerges from a different context, the fact that all recent divestments have featured community protest illustrates that these structures remain significant to their communities. While some cases demonstrate greater value based on historic function, others gravitate towards discussions of memory, and still others argue for architectural significance; the variety of reactions illustrate the need to understand the values with which people have collectively imbued these places. No single community is the same, and its local understanding of heritage may mirror or may contrast with the national narrative of this typology. However, the fact that these structures will continue to evolve within a community makes it of paramount importance that communities are able to have some say in the divestment and reuse of their common heritage.

Privatization: Balancing Public Benefits

In recent years, there appears to have been a marked increase in the sale of historic post offices to private interests. Although the use of 'private ownership' is often given negative connotations of limited public access, the case studies outlined below aim to examine a number of possibilities for the role of private ownership and public access.

The Venice California post office has already been discussed in the context of limited interior access, but another issue in the Venice case is responsible stewardship. At the time of the building's sale, it was believed that the Venice sale would be a success story [Image 27]. Joel Silver was already regarded as a responsible steward of historic properties; his restoration of Frank Lloyd Wright's 1923 Storer House has made it "the best-preserved Wright building in Los Angeles, and his purchase and restoration of the Wright-designed Auldbrass Plantation in South Carolina, reinforced his reputation as a friend, and even enthusiast, of preservation.²⁴ The adaptation of the Venice Post Office into the offices of Silver Productions, was seen as boon for the struggling surrounding neighborhood and a reasonable trade-off on public access. While renovations began quickly and the mural was restored soon after the lease agreement was approved, the project began to stall with allegations of delinquent payments to contractors.²⁵ Silver's involvement in bankruptcy hearings cast further doubt on the project's completion, and since 2015 the building has sat vacant, surrounded by scaffolding and fencing. Instead of creating the promised active office space where film

23 Daniel B. Delahaye (Federal Preservation Officer, USPS), in discussion with the author, April 2016.

24 For reference to the Storer house see: Hugh Eakin, "Fixer Uppers that Need Love and Concrete," *New York Times*, (August 14, 2005), <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/14/arts/design/fixeruppers-that-need-love-and-concrete.html>; For reference to Joel Silver's purchase and restoration of Auldbrass, see: Matt Lee and Ted Lee, "Auldbrass wasn't Rebuilt in a Day." *New York Times*, (November 30, 2003), <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/11/30/magazine/30WRIGHT.html?pagewanted=all>

25 James Rainey, "Joel Silver's Dream Venice Post Office Project is Stalled and In Debt," *Variety* (online), (2015), <http://variety.com/2015/film/news/joel-silver-venice-post-office-in-debt-1201460341/>



Image 27. Venice Post Office, Venice, California, 1939. Image courtesy of National Archives, College Park, MD. Record Group 121-BS.



Image 28. Venice Post Office, Venice, California, 2015. Image courtesy of *Variety*, online.



Image 29. Mark and Patricia Malcol in front of the Pennington Station Post Office, Plymouth Michigan, at time of sale, 2013. Image courtesy of Patricia Malcol.

screenings and lectures could occasionally be held, the building has become a graffiti-covered eyesore.²⁶ Here, a project that was initially regarded as an intelligent balance between neighborhood revitalization and the restriction of public access, was ultimately waylaid by circumstance. The good press engendered in the initial phases of the project has since been entirely repudiated as the considerable delay of the project has created worsening conditions, threatening the building with the effects of prolonged vacancy and lack of care [Image 28].²⁷

In another example of the sale of a historic post office to private interests, the Penniman Station Post Office in Plymouth, Michigan, provides a counterexample. In 2013, the 1935 building was sold to a local couple, Mark and Patricia Malcolm, and the post office moved its operations only a few doors down to a smaller facility [Image 29].²⁸ The Malcolms, who reside within the community, chose a program for the building that they saw as filling a void.²⁹ After approaching a number of large chain grocery stores which were not interested in the 21,436 square foot building, the Malcolms contacted a small, local grocery chain, Westborn Market, active in the Detroit metro area. As of April 2016, the 1935 structure is still under renovation, but is planned to open as a new Westborn Market location in May of 2016.³⁰ Due to the couple's choice to use Historic Rehabilitation Tax Credits, the rigors of receiving approval from the Michigan State Historic Preservation Office for all work completed under the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, caused a number of delays to renovations over the past year.³¹ The building's four 1938 Section murals, by Carlos Lopez, were restored by the USPS, and are being retained in situ through a long-term lease agreement between the Malcolms and the USPS.

The Malcolms' role as community members allowed them to represent not only their own private interests as property owners, but also to remain deeply aware of local interests. Unlike many cases of sale to private owners, in Plymouth, the reuse program is beneficial to the public sphere by providing a needed service and the installation of a business that will increase downtown foot traffic. However, it must be mentioned that the ability of USPS to relocate within the community helped to limit the controversy that is seen in most communities where relocation is often to another town, or far removed from the walkable historic center. Due to this unique set of events, the Plymouth Post Office offers a particularly significant case that should be revisited when the renovations are complete. Examining the town's reactions to a functionally very divergent use from the historic use of the building, will help to demonstrate how adaptable these structures can be.

26 Rainey, "Joel Silver's Dream Venice Post Office Project is Stalled and In Debt," (2015).

27 Here the role of the covenant holder is particularly interesting, as neglect negatively impacts and endangers the historic structure, but little action can be taken to induce Joel Silver to secure the structure. The covenant holder is only in charge of monitoring the structure's condition, and is not held responsible, either legally or financially, for any changes. As the main issue is continuing legal actions through bankruptcy hearings, and a lack of available capital on the part of Silver, the covenant holder would not achieve any beneficial results by further involving Silver in legal proceedings.

28 "Post Office Now in New Home in Downtown Plymouth," *Plymouth Voice*, (July 28, 2014), <http://plymouthvoice.com/post-office-now-in-new%E2%80%A8home-in-downtown-plymouth/>

29 Patricia Malcolm (owner of Plymouth, Michigan Post Office), in discussion with the author, March 2016.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

Civic Reuse: Historically and Today

As discussed previously, many early divestments from the USPS property portfolio were undertaken due to significant increases in mail volume, changes in mail delivery systems, and variations in urban planning principles. Interestingly, many of the properties divested in the first few decades of USPS ownership appear to have been reused as civic institutions. In some cases, the buildings became city halls, police stations, or municipal offices, in other instances they became community libraries, historical societies, or museums. The theme of public service and community access appears to illustrate a significant trend in the early divestments, however, as no master list is maintained to track divestments, nor to look at subsequent uses after divestment, it is difficult to substantiate this claim quantitatively.

According to the current preservation officer for the USPS, Daniel Delahaye, the USPS is working to collect this data for recently divested properties (within the last ten years) and hopes to have a list assembled in May 2016.³² The ability to analyze these results will allow the USPS to better represent its divestment procedures and to provide the transparency that is so often asked for in the debate around closures, relocations, and sales. However, gathering this data for all historic properties remains a difficult task. Digital database sites like *The Living New Deal* (<https://livingnewdeal.org/>) or blogs like *Save the Post Office* (<http://savethepostoffice.com/>), seek to provide this information but must rely on public participation to build a complete body of knowledge for such a geographically diffuse typology. The *Living New Deal* in particular, provides a substantial inventory of New Deal building projects across the nation, listing such information as architect, date completed, relief program involved, and address. In many instances buildings that are no longer post offices list a current use. While this is the most complete source of reuse information, it is by no means complete enough to allow for accurate qualitative analysis. Therefore, in looking through these records, the trend in early civic reuse projects appears to be significant but cannot be stated authoritatively and is an important topic for further development and research.

The reuse of New Deal era post offices as civic institutions is not a reuse pattern tied to geographic region or date of sale, but can instead be seen across the United States with surprising frequency. Post offices in at least twenty-seven states from Florida to Alaska have seen reuse as town, city, or county administrative offices, as well as specific city departments including Veteran's Affairs, Health Departments, Chambers of Commerce, and Economic Development Corporations. Examining the nearly 200 buildings listed by *Living New Deal* as "former" post offices, it was possible to loosely group buildings by their most recently identified use. Civic institutions, like those listed above, were grouped in a governance category, while structures reused as historical societies, museums, art centers, performance spaces, and libraries were grouped as institutions with a public service mission. Buildings sold to private interests included all structures where public access was limited or eliminated by the new use; this could include office or commercial spaces, as well as the rare instances where buildings have been converted to private residences. Although 43.7% of the buildings have been sold to private owners, it was interesting to see that 50.6%

32 Daniel B. Delahaye (Federal Preservation Officer, USPS), in discussion with the author, March 2016.

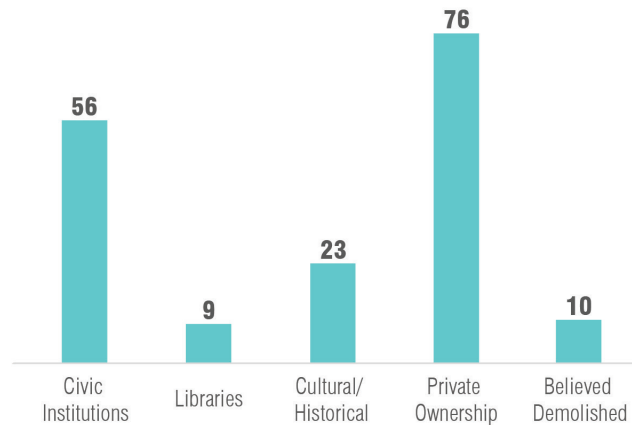


Chart 03. Type of reuse program for divested New Deal era post offices, based on rough data and tabulation of information available through *The Living New Deal*.

continue to serve the community through either administrative or cultural capacities. That 50.6% represents the 32.2% used in local governance capacities and the 18.6% fulfilling public service goals [Chart 03]. Although these numbers illustrate a broad trend, the information is not complete and the need to understand changing uses over time cripples the ability to come to any significant conclusions around this data. Due to the lack of available data, the use of case studies is a much more powerful way to understand how these buildings interact with their communities and how communities chose to reinterpret, reimagine, and reconnect with the legacy of these public structures.

In 1987, the city of Kings Mountain in North Carolina purchased the city's 1939 post office from the USPS. However, while it was bought in the interest of retaining an important community building, the city did not have an intended program, and the building sat vacant while the 1941 Verona Burkhard mural depicting "The Battle of Kings Mountain" was moved to the city hall two years later, in 1989. It was not until the 1990s that a local non-profit, the Kings Mountain Historical Museum approached the city with a reuse proposal that would return the post office to public use. In late 2000, the building became the museum's permanent home. In this case, the city had the foresight to purchase the building when it became available, and was able to allow the property to sit until an appropriate reuse program was proposed.

Since the opening of the Kings Mountain Historical Museum, the organization has incorporated a significant historic preservation mission with the acquisition and relocation of two additional historic structures, the 1830 Robert Barber House and the 1876 George W. Cornell House, to create an open air museum.³³ While the two older structures are interpreted more strictly to represent their periods of significance, the post office is able to house the museum's collections, main exhibits, visitor services, and administrative functions. The choice of these three structures and their historic contexts provides a compelling synthesis of the town's development, illustrating the early role of the farming community with a log cabin, the establishment of the city with a clapboard home from the city center, and the city's experience with the New Deal

³³ "Historic Preservation," *Kings Mountain Historical Museum*, <http://www.kingsmountainmuseum.org/historic-preservation.html>

and the Great Depression in the 1930s. On the event of the historic post office's seventy-fifth anniversary in 2015, and to celebrate the building's recent listing on the National Register, the mural was returned to its original location in the historic post office's lobby.³⁴

In the case of Kings Mountain, while discussions around the return of the mural took place over multiple years, the fact that the city was both the owner of the post office building and the long-term lease holder of the mural, allowed for an easier transition. Additionally, as the mural was relocated in 1989, and a typical USPS long-term lease has a twenty-five year duration, the lease was set to be renewed in 2014, allowing for changes in the terms of the agreement. Kings Mountain represents an important instance where a community could bring both architecture and artwork back together, not only engaging with theoretical concerns around significance, but also around community perception and the belief that the two resources are inexorably tied.

In Amherst, Ohio the 1939 New Deal post office has become the headquarters of Main Street Amherst, an official state- and nationally-recognized Main Street program. The Main Streets program was initially started by the National Trust for Historic Preservation and aims to provide communities with the tools to undertake long-term planning for the revitalization of historic central business districts across the nation.³⁵ The central location of the post office and its history as locus of community life and dialogue makes this reuse proposal particularly apropos. Main Street Amherst has been housed in the post office since 2003, working to achieve its mission, "To promote and maintain an economically vital historic downtown and business district that is attractive and accessible to people of all ages."³⁶ Although this organization is run independently from the city government, it consists of local business owners and interested citizens who attempt to guide local development, increase community involvement, organize events, and pursue historic preservation goals for the town center. Main Street Amherst works within the public sphere to serve the local community; even providing its headquarters as an events space to local non-profits and for community events. The 1941 mural "Pioneers Crossing the Ohio River," by Michael Loew, is still in its original location, and due to the building's reuse program, has effectively retained its role in the community.

Other recent divestments and sales have featured discussions around the need to own a property to effectively ensure its future. At the time of the city's purchase of the Guntersville, Alabama post office in 2010, the mayor, Bob Humbree, Jr., asserted, "It's one of the true landmarks in our city. [...] We could have let a private developer do something with it, but he might tear it down. You don't know its future unless you control it."³⁷ In a crowd-sourced entry of *Living New Deal*, one contributor expressed concern over the closure of the Forest Park, Illinois post office in terms of the mural, "The mural is not only a

34 Casey White, "Historical KM Mural 'Back Where it Belongs,'" *Gaston Gazette* (online), (June 28, 2015), <http://www.gastongazette.com/article/20150628/NEWS/150628968>

35 National Trust for Historic Preservation, "The Movement – Main Street America." *PreservationNation*, www.preservation-nation.org/main-street-america/themovement.html.

36 "Our Mission," *Main Street Amherst*, <http://mainstreetamherst.org/mission/>

37 Mike Marshall, "The Old Guntersville Post Office: 'One of the true landmarks in our city,'" *The Huntsville Times*, (online), (September 17, 2010), http://blog.al.com/huntsville-times-business/2010/09/the_old_guntersville_post_offi.html



Image 30. Kilgore Post Office, in Kilgore, Texas. The building is now run by the Kilgore Historic Preservation Foundation. Image courtesy of the Kilgore Historic Preservation Foundation

living example of Roosevelt's New Deal initiatives, but also encapsulates the history of the Forest Park community. Created specifically for the people of Forest Park, it is vital that this historical document and unique work of art does not get forgotten."³⁸ Without more developed stewardship responsibilities by the USPS, the future of these structures relies on the active participation of the community. This entails that communities must understand the significance of these structures, and work to ensure the retention of those values in the face of sale and inevitable reuse.

In Kilgore, Texas, a local preservation organization, Kilgore Historic Preservation Foundation (KHPF), was instrumental in acquiring the town's 1938 post office, raising \$40,000 in donations by community members in only two weeks.³⁹ KHPF was originally formed in 1987 around a mission to recreate the 1930's skyline of oil derricks that were a part of the town's historic identity and industry, but had rapidly disappeared over the previous half century. The old post office was created within the period of significance for the town, and due to the presence of the Section murals by Xavier Gonzales within (one of which relates to the oil industry), illustrates the industrial identity of Kilgore in the 1930s. In 2012, a reuse proposal for the building was accepted on its ability to serve the community as a history and arts center, actively "bridg[ing] the gap between remembering the past and living in the present."⁴⁰ Due to the fact that all funding is raised from community events and donations, the renovations have been slow; however, the slow pace has allowed

³⁸ Jessica Schmidt, "Post Office Mural – Forest Park, IL," *Living New Deal*, (May 2014), <https://livingnewdeal.org/projects/post-office-mural-forest-park-il/>

³⁹ "KHPF: History," *Kilgore Historic Preservation Foundation*, <http://kilgorehistory.org/history/>

⁴⁰ James Draper, "Stamp of Approval: KHPF Accepts Design Ideas for Planned Museum at Old Post Office," *Kilgore News Herald*, (May 26, 2012), <http://kilgorehistory.org/stamp-of-approval/>

KHPF to actively engage the community in the process, using the project to initiate discussions around how memory, community, and local history are embodied in this particular structure. Even the sale of naming rights to the old P.O. boxes was used as a chance to solicit community members to transcribe their memories; memories that would then be included in the organization's collections and disseminated to a broad audience of residents and visitors. While the Kilgore Historic Preservation Foundation is only partway through the renovation process, they have shown a marked ability to engage with discussions throughout the community and are seeking to ensure that the building remains relevant in the life of Kilgore [Image 30].

Such an ability to understand significance is a heavy burden to a community when sales are sudden, the experiences and memories are highly personal, and there is division over whether it is post office function or community service that the citizenry is fighting for. The case of Kilgore illustrates a success story of integrating a historical resource into the present while continuing a legacy of community service. However, one must be cautious in comparing these case studies as the contexts of their urban environments are quite distinct. In some cases, particularly in California, real estate is at a premium and communities are unable to arrive at a consensus, mobilize quickly, or fundraise effectively, particularly if there is no proposed program for the structure. This makes the need to understand both the significance of the national context of this typology and the unique conditions which shape a community's context essential in order to effectively engage with or define the value of each structure.

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CHAPTER 7

CHARACTERISTIC THEMES

THE PAST IS NOT THE PROPERTY OF HISTORIANS; IT IS A PUBLIC POSSESSION. IT BELONGS TO ANYONE WHO IS AWARE OF IT, AND IT GROWS BY BEING SHARED. IT SUSTAINS THE WHOLE SOCIETY, WHICH ALWAYS NEEDS THE IDENTITY THAT ONLY THE PAST CAN GIVE. IN THE GRAPES OF WRATH, JOHN STEINBECK PICTURES A GROUP OF OKLAHOMA FARM WIVES LOADING THEIR GOODS INTO AN OLD TRUCK FOR THE LONG TRIP TO CALIFORNIA. THEY DID NOT HAVE MANY POSSESSIONS, BUT THERE WAS NOT ROOM FOR WHAT THEY HAD. [...]

THESE ARE NOT MEMBERS OF A HISTORICAL SOCIETY. THEY HAD NEVER SEEN A MUSEUM OR A MEMORIAL. THEY WERE JUST PEOPLE, ASKING A POIGNANT AND UNIVERSAL QUESTION: "HOW WILL WE KNOW IT'S US WITHOUT OUR PAST?"

WE DO NOT CHOOSE BETWEEN THE PAST AND THE FUTURE;
THEY ARE INSEPARABLE PARTS OF THE SAME RIVER.

DR. WALTER HAVIGHURST, 1966

The case studies outlined in the previous chapter illustrate a large variety of conditions, contexts, results, and outcomes that are difficult to distill into a small number of best practices. However, a number of common issues call attention to the factors that have determined successful results, which are sympathetic to the buildings and in keeping with the social, cultural, and historical values expressed by these structures.

Part of the challenge is that while these buildings represent a national context and history, local conditions are so highly varied as to make standard treatments largely impossible. Each community places a different level of importance on each of the following factors: the role of the public sphere, community engagement, the revitalization of downtowns and public spaces, the importance of public access, the integrity of art and architecture, and the role of these historic resources as sites of memory. The complicated intersection of these values and local priorities should shape the way that the New Deal post office is incorporated in each of the one thousand communities in which they are present.

The Public Sphere

Defining the origins of these structures as public infrastructure with a public service program implies that continuing service is an essential component of each building's purpose. The idea of the cultural commons additionally suggests that ownership should be maintained by a government entity to ensure the maintenance of the cultural commons. However, divestment of underutilized structures is an acknowledged right of federal agencies, and while GSA's Historic Surplus Properties Program might be better at effecting this goal, the USPS's role as a financially independent organization from the federal government restricts its ability to follow this procedure and retain fiscal responsibility. Without congressional action on changing this procedure, the USPS is able to continue divesting underutilized properties as it has since the agency's establishment in 1970.

However, the USPS should recognize the value of its legacy in addition to its role as a federal institution with a public service obligation. Maintaining a good relationship with local communities and the greater public should be an important tenet of the USPS's mission, as the institution, while an independent government agency, does still exist and function under the aegis of Congress. Recognizing the symbolic national-local relationship that is so expressive of the New Deal ideology while divesting these properties, should result in more sensitive treatment of these structures as historically significant places of civic society, communication, and identity.

Looking at how the public sphere is defined today is an essential component of this issue. As a space between the private sphere and the government, the public sphere is a place where individuals can meet publicly to discuss, debate, and share ideas (often with a political connotation). The concept was first broadly enunciated by German scholar Jürgen Habermas, in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), and was applied to the discussions around democracy and individual liberty that occurred

in public spaces, like squares, coffee shops and cafes, as well as in literature and academic debate.¹ Urban sociologist, Ray Oldenburg, further explored this idea in his 1989 book, *The Great Good Place*, and posited that a happy and healthy life requires a balance between home (the private), work (the professional), and a “third place” (Habermas’ public realm) that Oldenburg briefly enunciates as “Cafés, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community” as the subtitle of his work.²

Today, the concept of the public sphere has expanded most significantly to include the internet as an additional platform for communication beyond the limiting factor of geographic proximity. While the post office may have been a daily feature of the public sphere at the time of its creation, today, post offices are not the only source of information, communication, or interaction within a locality. Yet, as many of the case studies illustrate, some communities have used the post office to represent a different aspect of the public sphere, engaging different groups, discussing different issues, and reusing the buildings to effect targeted outcomes for the surrounding community. The case studies that have illustrated this have been highly successful, and by targeting a specific aspect of the community’s public sphere the reuse of the building can be more meaningfully tied to the public life of the town that it was originally created to serve.

Engaging Community in Pursuing Reuse

Engaging with the values held by each community is essential in achieving the best possible outcome following divestment. While some communities have stressed the value of historic function, others have been more amenable to changing use; however, changing use has rarely meant that a community is open to giving up public access, and instead prefers to retain the structure’s accessibility and its program as an active addition to the downtown. Reuse proposals have been widely divergent, but it is important to note that private ownership does not always result in a loss of access or vibrancy. Instead, some cases have illustrated that proposals that come from private owners based within the community – like the Malcolms in Plymouth, Michigan – are more responsive to community concerns than private owners that are out-of-area, like the new owners of the Ukiah Post Office, based in Fort Bragg, fifty miles away. Prioritizing the sale of these historic structures to interested parties from within the community may be one step in ensuring more responsive reuse proposals. In any case, the sale of historic structures to national chain stores – like Walgreens in Virginia Beach, Virginia and CVS in Derry, New Hampshire – has been demonstrably negative to historic fabric.

The reuse of the Amherst, Ohio post office as the headquarters of Main Streets Amherst remains an optimal reuse design that amplifies the continuing role of the building within the public sphere and the downtown, becoming a symbol of the larger revitalization efforts and the main forum for discussions around community identity and growth. Incorporating New Deal era post offices into Main Streets programming is an optimal way to retain these structures while expanding their historic role within the community. Particu-

¹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, translated to English 1991).
² Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place* (New York: Paragon House, 1989).

larly as this historic post office typology is located along main streets in towns across America, the inclusion of these structures in more of the main streets programming nationwide offers a notable preservation opportunity at the heart of small town revitalization efforts.

Revitalization and the Role of Active Spaces

One of the USPS's main tenets of its divestment undertakings is that in selling underutilized structures, the USPS is allowing communities to revitalize their historic downtowns. As post offices are no longer a driver of high volume foot traffic, a building's sale allows for the town center to attract a new use that can increase street activity. As this is stated as a primary benefit in the sale of these structures, particularly when communities organize around a desire to maintain historic use, the fact that some sales have resulted in vacant and closed buildings eliminates the stated benefit. In Ukiah, the community consented to the sale of the post office because they no longer wanted the building to sit vacant, however, the sale did not result in a quick reuse proposal, the building continues to be vacant, and the community has little ability to seek a resolution. In Venice, the stalled restoration has resulted in more significant damage to the building than has been seen when the USPS allowed a building to remain vacant, implying a greater demonstrated responsibility of care by the USPS than with private owners who may be largely inaccessible to the community.

While the reuse of post offices as office buildings is a popular reuse program, office space creates limited street life and the properties are not able to be activated in the same way that a commercial retail space would allow. Some of the early divestments included doctors', dentists', or lawyers' offices. In Mt. Kisco, where the post office building is now the home of the law office of Singleton, Davis & Singleton, the lobby is left unlocked during business hours and the community is free to enter and view the two Donnelly murals; however, the lobby is devoid of activity, neither a space for the law firm to actively program, nor a place that community members have a reason to visit. Post offices are in fact a commercial retail service, and replacing the historic program with an in-kind retail program which prompts foot traffic is one way to attempt to provide revitalization through the divestment process.

Recently, discussions have emerged around reuse programs that are at odds with the program of the historic building they are reinterpreting or adapting. In particular, churches, which are suffering from shrinking congregations, have been reused as residential spaces in recent years. This reuse program has been deemed inadequate, as it takes a building with a large interior volume meant to contain large crowds and to interact with light and space in a way that reinforces a spiritual mission, and turns it into a series of subdivided spaces that have little relation to exterior fenestration, decoration, or style. While post offices are more easily adaptable to common programs, the understanding of the post office as a program involving a public space with an active retail component implies the need for a reuse proposal that maintains the relationship between the structure and the public. The fact that much of the square footage of the post office was traditionally dedicated to "back of house" sorting facilities that the public would not have expe-

rienced, provides freedom for reuse proposals to either retain the restricted access to these working areas while maintaining the historically public nature of the lobby, or to open the rear spaces to greater public access. The plan by some developers to maintain a post office desk – leased to the USPS – in the lobby, while renovating most of the sorting rooms as office space (accessible from a rear entrance) is more in line with the traditional, historic function of the buildings. In contrast, other proposals, like the grocery store in Plymouth, Michigan, amplify the public access component and open more of the structure to daily use. In either case, the ability to ensure active public engagement with the lobby, allows the building to continue to provide an important benefit to the public sphere and the town’s main street, and is the most important aspect of the reuse program.

Public Access

As a corollary to maintaining the public sphere, engaging community, and creating active spaces, the importance of continuing public access remains a key issue of any reuse proposal. In particular, the presence of interior public art supports the strong intention of these structures to remain open to the community in perpetuity. The continued presence of the artwork creates an imperative to allow access, and in some cases like Santa Monica, where no interior art is present, it was easier to allow reuse proposals to restrict access and privatize the building.

The USPS has stated a preference for leaving artwork in situ, but has not gone so far as to prioritize continued daily public access. Only in the case of long-term lease agreements is public access discussed, and then can be limited as to largely negate the original intention of the Section in providing art to towns across the nation.

Architecture and Artwork: a Past and Future Relationship

From an academic standpoint, the fact that the buildings and their art were created within an overarching ideological framework and at a particular moment of American history, makes maintaining the historical connection between the architectural expression of the buildings and the regional or local expressions embodied within the artwork essential for the future interpretation of these structures.

However, while some communities have prioritized the mural in its original location, others have found that the mural is lost to the community when the building is removed from the public sphere. While the Kings Mountain Historical Museum, fought to reunite mural and building, the Ukiah community understood that the loss of public access to the now vacant post office did not mean that the mural also had to be lost to the community. Thus, Ukiah is engaged in discussions for the relocation of the mural to a more highly visible location.



Image 31. "The British Come to See Augusta" by William Dean Fausett for the Augusta Post Office, in Augusta, Georgia. Now in storage. Image courtesy of Jimmy Emerson (flickr).

In rare instances, the removal of the artwork from public view has been a desire of the community due to some depictions of inappropriate, inaccurate or racist characterizations of history. In Warrentown, Georgia a 1940 mural by Arnold Friedman, "Environs of Warrentown," that depicted African American women gathering cotton, was removed in the 1980s due to complaints about the mural's content. Today, the mural hangs in the Visitors Center at the Augusta Museum of Art in Augusta, Georgia.³ Interestingly, the mural commissioned from William Dean Fausett for the post office of Augusta, Georgia is also held at the Augusta Museum of Art, but due to the historical inaccuracies of the painting – depicting the arrival of James Oglethorpe by water (he actually arrived at Augusta over land and established a settlement there in 1736) – the mural has been removed and placed in storage [Image 31].⁴ In another extreme, the original mural, "Bathers" by Elizabeth Tracy, for the post office in Kennebunkport, Maine, was so offensive to the community that the local citizenry immediately raised the funds to replace the mural with a harbor scene by a well-known watercolorist, Gordon Grant.⁵ The whereabouts of the original Tracy mural are unknown [Image 32]. In the most dramatic of cases, a Postmaster was responsible for painting over a work soon after it was completed, believing the style to be too modern (as in Okolona, Mississippi), the work to be too suggestive,

³ "Environs of Warrentown," *New Deal Art Registry*, <http://www.newdealartregistry.org/artist/Friedmanarnold/>

⁴ "Augusta Post Office Mural (In Storage) – Augusta, GA," *Living New Deal*, <https://livingnewdeal.org/projects/old-post-office-mural-augusta-ga/>

⁵ The dramatic story of the Kennebunkport mural is best read in Marling (see 272-280), however, in quick summary, the mural was so offensive to the community because Kennebunkport, while a maritime community and resort town, did not have a beach like the one depicted, but their nearby rival Kennebunk did. Additionally, the bathers were considered 'too Rubenesque,' and too naked, for the town's liking. This distaste was further exacerbated by the fact that Kennebunk had a very well regarded mural of a stage coach that Kennebunkport was quite envious of.; Marling, *Wall to Wall America*, 280.

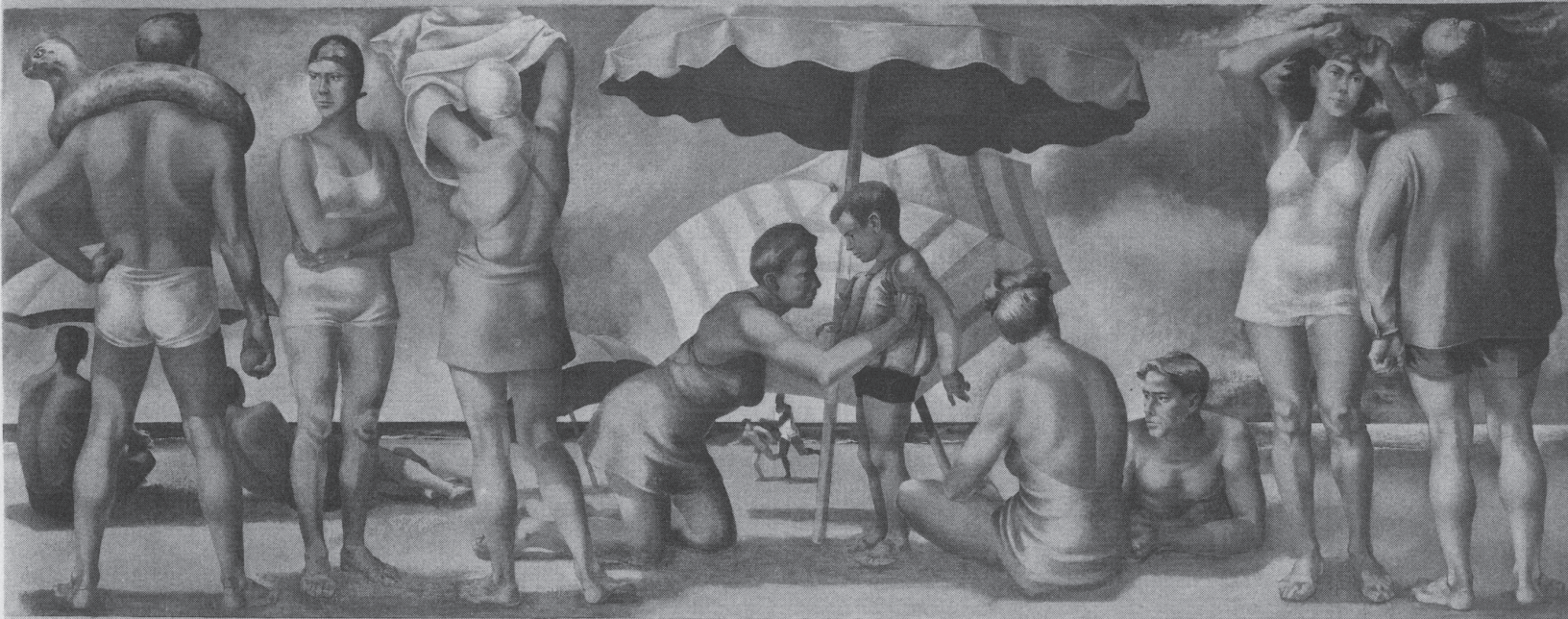


Image 32. “Bathers” by Elizabeth Tracy, for the Kennebunkport Post Office in Kennebunkport, Maine, 1941. Whereabouts now unknown. Image courtesy of National Archives, College Park, MD. Record Group 121-CMS.

or, from mere dislike. In the case of the Reno, Nevada post office, it is rumored that the postmaster painted over a mural by Benjamin Cunningham due to personal disapproval of the New Deal and FDR’s policies.⁶

However, in the vast majority of cases, communities have maintained and cherished their artwork, reinterpreting it as the need arises or using it as a way to instigate discussions around community and national history. Today the National Postal Museum, in conjunction with the National Museum of the American Indian, is working to reinterpret all Section and TRAP murals that depict Native Americans. Subjects, narrative, and representational style have been interpreted to address historical inaccuracies, misconceptions, contemporary racism, and overlooked cultural histories.⁷ Murals with inaccurate depictions have not been targeted for removal, but are instead used to engage the public in dialogue around the differences between historical and modern social perceptions. Native American history has been prioritized largely due to the high volume of murals containing Native American themes, but this attempt to analyze and reinterpret the art of the 1930s has allowed these works to be addressed holistically and on an individual basis, benefiting a broader audience than the surrounding community.

⁶ The Reno case remains a mystery. In an article in the local Reno news, historian Mella Harmon was quoted, “It was there, but there’s no photographs that exist of it and no documentation other than some reminiscences of people who knew it was there. And it’s become this huge mystery. It’s like—is it still there, under a coat of paint?” The recent sale of the former post office in 2012, included discussions around the possibility that the mural may still exist and if proven to be present, the building’s restoration would include the uncovering of the long-lost painting.; Dennis Myers, “How the New Deal Built Nevada” *News Review*, (May 15, 2008), <https://www.newsreview.com/reno/how-the-new-deal-built/content?oid=664643>. ; Dennis Myers, “Lost Painting Found?” *News Review*, (March 27, 2014), <https://www.newsreview.com/reno/lost-painting-found/content?oid=13051363> ; Benjamin Cunningham is also the artist of the Ukiah Post Office mural “Resources of the Soil.”

⁷ Sandra Starr, “Indians at the Post Office,” National Postal Museum. <http://postalmuseum.si.edu/indiansatthepostoffice/index.html>



Image 33. "Out of the Soil" by Beulah Buttersworth, for the Columbus Post Office, in Columbus, Mississippi. Image courtesy of Jimmy Emerson (flickr). Used with the permission of the United States Postal Service®. All rights reserved.

In Columbus, Mississippi, a conversation was started around the community's evaluation and perception of the 1939 mural, "Out of the Soil," by New York artist Beulah Buttersworth. Ira Lanier, who was born in Columbus, but now resides in Colorado, started a campaign to have the artwork removed from the post office, arguing that the mural was outdated and racist in its depiction of "a scene with black field hands picking cotton [...and] a white man guiding a mule-powered plow."⁸ Although the campaign did not result in the removal of the mural, the town became actively involved in discussing local history and personal reflections on the content of the mural [Image 33]. Despite the fact that many agreed that it was racially insensitive, the town as a whole found that the mural should remain in the post office where it could continue to depict a historical reality that should never be forgotten.⁹ Interestingly, in looking back at the mural's original installation, the post office had a number of letters and notes from the period on file, including an unattributed note that stated that many community members, generally African-Americans, were offended. In a particularly colorful statement, the unknown author also admitted that Buttersworth's work contained a number of agricultural inaccuracies, but was "pretty good for a Yankee woman who never saw the South end of a northbound mule."¹⁰

Due to the nature of its creation, the works of art created under the Section remain best understood in their original locations, and 1930s post office structures with interior art remain the fullest expression of the federal building program during the New Deal. As such, these historic artifacts, where art and architec-

8 Garthia Elena Burnett, "Post Office Mural Raised Questions of Racial Sensitivity," *The Dispatch*, (January 15, 2011), <http://www.cdispatch.com/news/article.asp?aid=9619>

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

ture were provided by the national government, should be thought of as a cultural unit. Despite the fact that many works can be removed without damage, this does not mean that they should be, and in every case of their removal, some understanding of the context and intention of these pieces is lost.

Sites of Memory and History

The strength of many of the preservation projects outlined in the case studies above is due to the ability of these historic spaces to address local connections to the structure, illustrate unique moments of history, and act as places of memory. Even with the loss of access to a building, the closure and sale of these structures has catalyzed the community in discussing and occasionally recording its history. In Ukiah, numerous personal stories were covered in the local news, illustrating the population's connection to the building in a powerful way. In Kilgore, the renovations of the building allowed the community to record its history. In many ways the conversation around divestments has been timely, as threats to the buildings have resulted in active discussions and values assessments by communities seeking to enunciate the role of these structures today. Any person old enough to remember the construction of these structures is today quite elderly, and without documenting the memories of this generation while they are still present, the stories of the era will largely be lost. In this way, the divestment process has forced communities to assess their historical relationships to the threatened structures.

Modern Significance

The fact that these buildings have more significance to older generations is one issue that emerges around discussions of value and appropriate reuse. Younger generations have become increasingly geographically mobile, and with less expressive attachment to place it becomes difficult to argue for the continued significance of these structures based on local heritage alone. In addition, while the context of the national typology of the New Deal era post office is an important national narrative, the ability to make that history visible to the local context is often challenging. These issues are precisely why the reuse of these structures, and the discussions around divestment remain so essential.

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CHAPTER 8

RECOMMENDATIONS

IN MURAL AMERICA, PEOPLE PEERED INTO PICTURES IN POST OFFICES EARNESTLY AND
PURPOSEFULLY AND ANXIOUSLY, LOOKING FOR THE COURAGE TO DREAM.
THE PICTURE WAS A WINDOW TO YESTERDAY, SHOWING THE TROUBLED PEOPLE THE DREAMS
THAT THEIR FOREBEARS ONCE DARED TO DREAM. [...]
AS THEY WATCHED, THAT RESONANT PICTURE OF HOME BEGAN TO SPARKLE WITH
THE PROMISE OF A SERENE AND BOUNTIFUL TOMORROW. [...]
THE PICTURE OF MURAL AMERICA SHOWED THE MIGHTY DREAM THAT ALWAYS CAME TRUE.

KARAL ANN MARLING, 1982

The national and the hyper-local context that is unique to the New Deal post office is symbolic of the complicated issues that must be navigated by the USPS. At once, this nationally created and nationally owned building type is simultaneously laden with local connotations and realities. The USPS has attempted to undertake divestment proceedings with a variety of tools from preservation covenants and long-term lease agreements, to varying levels of Section 106 compliance and community involvement, however, it appears that new tools must be developed to better meet the expectations of communities nationwide.

Discussions around “rightsizing” the post office may in fact be necessary as the postal system evolves either beyond its historic role to offer new services or disappears into the increasingly digital world, however, these discussions have been framed poorly, making communities feel targeted and unable to adequately express their concerns in a transparent, accessible forum. Although little can be accomplished in this work to alter the current standards of policy and procedure, from the standpoint of the preservation field and the voluntary actions of the USPS, a few things should change to allow for more proactive involvement with divestment on both the part of the community and the USPS.

Programmatic Approaches

Much discussion has revolved around whether the USPS should undertake divestments through a programmatic approach (as recommended by the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the ACHP), or to continue analyzing properties as stand-alone divestment opportunities. The concurrent national and local identities embodied by the New Deal post office type makes this issue particularly difficult to grapple with. On the one hand, in bypassing a programmatic approach, the identity of these structures within a national context is lost and an important focus on the role of these buildings as a national network of communication points becomes obscured by a narrower focus. However, if a programmatic approach is undertaken without additional evaluation of local contexts, the specific elements of each structure – which are grounded in local conditions – are lost to the larger picture. Therefore, mediating an approach between these two layers is essential for a responsible national divestment plan that is responsive to local concerns. Where the programmatic approach seems to work best is in determining locations nationwide that should receive further study for divestment. Due to recent concentrated divestments in regional areas (as seen in California and Connecticut), the initiation of a programmatic approach would alleviate fears that the USPS, under the influence of CBRE, is blatantly targeting its most lucrative properties, instead of its most underutilized. Following this broad study to prioritize needed closures, relocations, and divestments, the USPS should be more highly involved in assessing local values and community capacity.

Community Opportunities

Community involvement has been the most heavily critiqued aspect of the divestment process, as communities are informed of closure too late in the process to develop a broad consensus. This area is where preservation organizations, community groups, Main Streets organizations, and local landmarks commissions have an opportunity to proactively inform discussions around preservation, even prior to a structure's announced closure.

Preservation Opportunities

Most community members are not actively reflecting on the values, histories, and stories of significance embodied within built heritage until that heritage is actively threatened. This issue, of always initiating a campaign as a reactive measure, instead of proactively seeking to build the capacity of an informed public, is the primary issue that the preservation field faces in all of its campaigns to save threatened resources.

Taking inspiration from the Kilgore and Ukiah efforts, these structures can be used as touchstones of community identity. By establishing projects that seek to record the history of these buildings and the stories of the communities that use them, a larger process of community education can begin. These outreach efforts, which begin conversations around a building prior to its being threatened, provide one method by which preservation can help to inform the broader public of a resource's significance, valorizing the structure as a valuable presence in the community. This in turn helps to foster a well-informed community, which is more likely to be meaningfully involved in future preservation efforts.

The Role of Local Landmarks

In areas with local landmark commissions, preparing documentation and discussing the eligibility of the building as a locally designated landmark is an important step in ensuring that, if necessary, the commission can act quickly to landmark the building. Local landmarking provides the strongest protections for built heritage and allows for broad oversight on the preservation of the historic exterior in its form, massing, style, and context. In some cases, working with the USPS to allow the local listing of the building prior to sale, or as a condition of the preservation covenant, can help to ensure that the building is sensitively adapted. This also allows the community to retain some voice in the process through the actions of the preservation commission and the ability for public comment at commission hearings. Not all cities have local landmark commissions however, and while they will not have the same level of administrative involvement, they are still able to pursue other planning approaches, like contextual zoning, that can at least help to limit the redevelopment options of the property, maintaining the context of the main street.



Image 34. “Settler Fighting Alligator from Rowboat” by Joseph D. Myers. For the Lake Worth Post Office on Lucerne Avenue in Lake Worth, Florida. Commissioned by the Section as part of a larger series of works, completed in 1946. Image courtesy of Jimmy Emerson (flickr). Used with the permission of the United States Postal Service®. All rights reserved.

Envisioning a Future

Early and frequent conversations around a historic resource also allow locals to actively envision the future of the building within the community. Making the post office a more visible part of the community helps to keep that community actively involved. Many of the case studies that resulted in reuse by museums and heritage organizations, or the Amherst Main Streets program, were able to succeed because they had ample time to develop a proposal, raise funding, meet with stakeholders, and pursue acquiring and developing the building. This is often difficult in areas with more desirable real estate, where post office sales may be quick or highly competitive. In this scenario, a community that has already begun to discuss the possible future of the building in question will be better able to engage with the process, and to effect the goals of a broad community vision.

Additionally, conversations involving a community's historic New Deal post office are not limited to preservation interests or architectural aspects of the building. Particularly, as these structures hold Section artwork, which was often the first piece of public art in a given town (and still may be the only one), the post office holds a unique role as the initiator of community conversations around art, and influenced greater reflection on local history, industry, culture, leisure, and the perceptions of folk life. These aspects of the historic resource, which are embodied in its artwork, can be addressed by a number of community stakeholders far outside the realm of preservation. To illustrate one example, the fact that the post office can be tied to a town's early experiences with art, makes the post office a logical point of discussion for art societies, local artists, and students. Allowing for a number of groups to explore their relation to, and understanding of, the building and its artwork can help to inspire a number of reuse ideas that have the opportunity to be acted on when the building is targeted for divestment. Moreover, increasing the number of community groups that are actively engaged with the resource and its future allows for ideas that may be far more creative regarding the building's future use, beyond the creation of a historical society or museum.

Reuse Opportunities: Interpreting the Public Sphere and Public Infrastructure

Reusing the Public Sphere or 'the Third Place'

Interpreting the New Deal post office as an important contribution to the public sphere, due to its historical role and the values of the surrounding community, is one of the most appropriate methods to reuse these structures. Such an approach not only maintains the continuity of a building's program, but also offers a wide variety of options for the future use of the structure.

Like the places discussed by Habermas – cafes, plazas, and taverns – or those added by Oldenburg as the 'third place' – including bookstores and hair salons – the value of spaces for the public to mingle and communicate provides a wealth of options for the reuse of the post office. The post office historically, as a retail use that actively engaged the community, provided an important space for the informal connections and conversations that help to define the public sphere in any community. This social interaction remains a necessary element of daily life and in the words of Oldenburg, feature at "the heart of the community" and "get you through the day."¹

As stated earlier, the generational divide regarding the experience and the importance of the post office, is one of the issues at the heart of whether these structures will be able to remain an important and active part of the American landscape. It is through reimagining and maintaining these buildings' roles within the public sphere that younger generations will have a better ability to experience these structures and understand the legacy of the New Deal in an active and participatory way.

¹ Oldenburg, *The Great Good Way*.

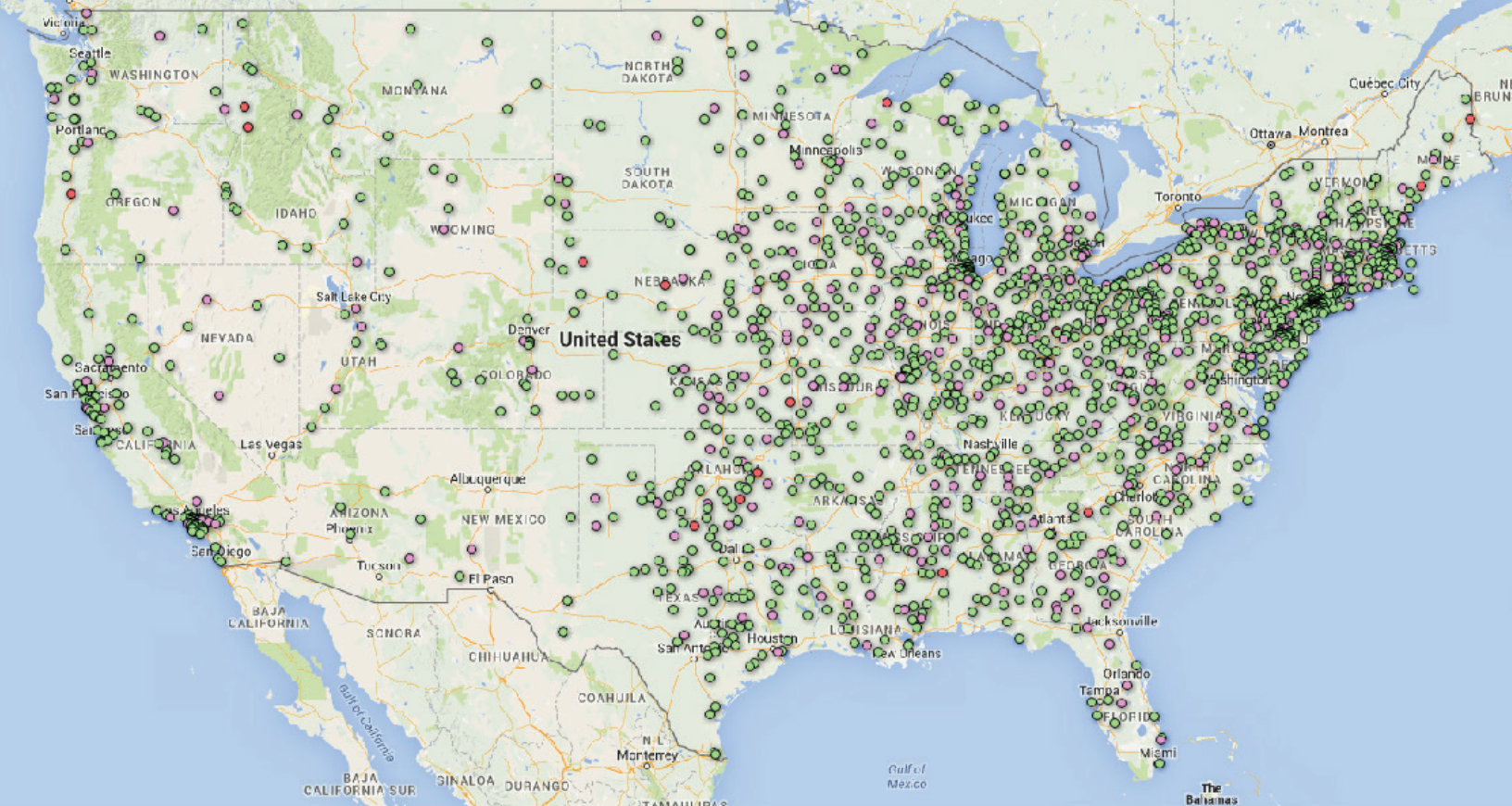
In particular, the role of cafes and coffee shops today, provide a compelling reuse case for these structures. These uses create high volumes of foot traffic when they are centrally located, which by their urban morphology these historic post offices are. Coffee shops are especially good at moving a large number of people through a space and with the 'to-go' market, coffee shops interact with customers in a very similar way to the post office, dealing in quick retail and pick-up transactions. The limited space needed for either of these uses, which would be focused in the lobby, would provide all of the traditionally unseen, 'back of house' sorting facilities for another use. Less active uses, like office retail space, could easily adapt the large square footage of these areas. This relationship, with an active, public sphere use in the lobby, and less active, less public uses kept to the rear reinforces the traditional and intended relationship between the public and the New Deal post office structure, and additionally maintains the key interaction between the visitor and the Section artwork created to uplift the community and foster the enjoyment of art in all citizens.

It is important to think of the moment of divestment as an opportunity to ensure that the historic post offices across the nation can remain active and meaningful contributors to the life of their communities and the nation. Future generations will never experience the daily trip to the post office to retrieve mail, to run into a neighbor, to hear the local news, or to discuss recent events. But maybe they can visit the town's old post office to attend a performance, exhibit, or a talk, to speak to a local official, to meet a friend for coffee, or maybe even to talk to a stranger. The mail is no longer a social motivator of daily life, but a myriad of other things have filled the vacuum to satisfy a need for social interaction. In the absence of the mail, another use can be found to fill the void in the old post office and ensure that these structures are incorporated as active public places of community life.

Interpreting the National Network

Interpreting the New Deal post offices as a national network is one of the greatest challenges for the modern understanding of these structures. These buildings are not only a network as defined by their typology, but within the larger network of the postal service, originally connected through post roads, rail lines, freight lines, and distribution centers. When completed, these buildings were active contributors to the national mail system, yet today, after divestment, the sites remain part of a network only through their shared history.

Most, if not all, historic 1930s post office locations have been mapped, and the available data powerfully illustrates the geographic spread of these resources [Map 1]. However, these structures have much more in common than their function, but the lack of available data means that any further interpretation of the typology remains difficult. Available data does not look at the characteristics of each site as a means of comparing, analyzing, or illustrating these resources in a referential manner that helps to unite them as a national group. Beyond the context of their creation, many structures represent similar styles, or are adaptations of the same standardized design; others share artists, while many more share themes represented



Map 1. Post offices built from 1931 to 1942. This map courtesy of *The Living New Deal's* mapping functions. While this illustrates the large geographic spread in the continental United States, this version does not include post offices constructed in territories and protectorates of the United States. Additionally, this information is not complete, and more work must be done to create a full data set for future analysis.

through their artwork. In all of these instances, examining the context of the group casts light on the role of each distinct resource. Like the work underway in re-examining murals with depictions of Native Americans, grouping themes, understanding styles, and examining political and local contexts in a broader framework helps to illuminate the larger perspectives and dialogues of society during and since the 1930s.

Interpreting a network is a difficult task and one that lacks many successful examples. Recent work around old rail lines have attempted to re-establish historic routes through new modes of transport; world heritage sites have included historic routes or a group of associated sites, but all of these have had limited success at ensuring that the public is made aware of the relationship between geographically diffuse, but ideologically or historically connected places. The New Deal post office may only be able to be interpreted through a digital platform in order to illustrate the larger network of structures, or the place of one single building within the national collection, however, continuing to try to understand these structures as part of a larger whole is essential in retaining the national significance of these resources.

The USPS: Interpreting a Legacy and Determining Metrics

The USPS does have significant oversight in choosing a responsible steward for the building. Nothing in the divestment process says that it must accept the highest bidder, and the USPS is able to look at a variety of factors prior to choosing a proposed bid. While changing the internal process by which the USPS

comes to its final decisions is largely impossible from the outside, or without directives by Congress, the USPS should still undertake a process by which it can more fully judge the results of its actions.

The United States Postal Service has a substantial legacy, one that can be visualized through the growth of the national postal system and the creation of its post offices, one that is included in the development of transportation, one that is directly responsible for the innovation of Americans in the nineteenth century, and one that has directly touched the lives of every generation of American citizens. In undertaking the divestment of a substantial number of historically significant properties, properties that share the legacy of the New Deal and the changing identity of the nation during the Great Depression, and which are the last of their type due to the substantial changes of Post-WWII America, the USPS must begin to more fully explore the standards and metrics used to determine what makes a divestment successful today. If it is a matter of achieving a high return on the initial investment of the USPS, the properties can be easily sold with no thought to their significance. However, as these structures are undeniably significant to the history of the nation, it is irresponsible to regard these buildings as merely financial assets in need of liquefying. The current financial picture of the USPS has required that the agency's fiduciary responsibilities remain a significant part of the conversation, however, the USPS should also seek to understand its responsibility in ensuring that these structures are retained within the national landscape as valuable resources that continue to have meaning to communities today.

Exploring the divestments undertaken in recent years in comparison with the agency's earlier divestments is an important starting point for determining metrics of success. In particular, looking at whether buildings have been successfully reused soon after their sale is an important factor in whether the community is able to benefit from the sale, and whether the USPS's stated belief that the sales create local opportunity holds true. The fact that many properties are left vacant for years is one negative impact of the divestment process that should receive further attention. In addition, while some numbers are available through the work of interested citizens through sites like *Living New Deal* or *Save the Post Office*, the USPS does not provide its own numbers to the broader public. Although it appears that the USPS lacks an adequate record that would allow for the easy tabulation of relevant quantitative data, this lack of data also results in the inability of the USPS to support its own statements on the continued value, pace, and benefits of the divestment process.

The complicated issues around the approximately 1,000 New Deal post offices with Section art have made the treatment of these structures challenging and contentious, yet, the fact that these structures represent an exceptional moment in the nation's history means that their treatment should be sensitive to their importance and meaning. The need for continued interior access, and the issues of public service, community involvement, and downtown revitalization are not applicable to all of the holdings of the postal service, or of federally-owned buildings more generally. Today, the United States government does not pursue this same type of building program, nor has any building program in the history of the nation aimed

to represent both the federal and the local as intimately as the New Deal post office. The difficulties today around understanding what to do with these structures only further illustrates the changing relationship between the government and its citizenry, and only highlights the reasons why this type of building program will never exist again. Thus, the fact that these resources represent a relatively small number within the national body of federal architecture (numbering only about 1,000 or 11.7% of the 8,500 USPS-owned properties) should be a forceful enough reason why these buildings should be treated more sensitively. These resources should to be treated in a way that is cognizant of their impact, both as a type, and as individual sites that represent a time, a mentality, and a moment that might never occur again, but can be preserved, interpreted for future generations, and reintegrated into the public life of a community to achieve the same results for which they were designed.

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CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION

This thesis sought to analyze and codify the reasons that New Deal era post offices with interior artwork are a significant part of the nation's story that should remain a part of its future. Through examining the role of the resources, the history of their creation, the unique presence and role of Section artwork, and the value of these structures to the communities that have relied on them, it is clear that these buildings, while complex, multi-faceted, and often exhibiting divergent meanings, are highly significant not only to the nation's history, the legacy of the New Deal, and the changing role of government, but are highly connected to regional and local identity. Examining the variety of reuse options and proposals that have already been in place for a number of these structures illustrated the wide range of options, and the high level of adaptability that is possible with the New Deal typology. Particularly as the nation has moved away from its post-war suburban focus, preferring higher density and seeing a resurgence of urban living, the central locations of these structures in towns and cities across the nation makes them even more valuable for reuse.

The fact that changing function is a reality for these 1,000 structures is one of the greatest stumbling blocks for concerned communities, who still place a high value on the role of the post office. Retaining a particular use or function has recently been a significant issue that – while difficult to effect due to the legal issues involved, and as use is ancillary to many traditional preservation issues – has increasingly become a part of the larger preservation framework that aims to assist in fostering the resilience and strength of communities. In San Francisco, legislation to protect legacy businesses has attempted to provide some assistance to locally-owned businesses that have served the community for over thirty years. While this cannot regulate the function of a given building, it attempts to reward longtime business owners by monetizing a community value that may induce them to stay. This is not possible when dealing with the USPS, and as it continues to downsize, arguments around the community's desire to retain a post office in a historic location have not been beneficial beyond providing a slight delay in a building's sale. Without a significant change in the nature of the USPS's business model, the buildings under discussion will not be able to retain their historic function; a fact that communities must be cognizant of to effectively engage with and recommend realistic reuse proposals. However, the idea of community resilience is of particular interest in this case, as these structures were originally created to stabilize communities. Today, with better understanding around the benefits of heritage worldwide, these resources provide a new opportunity to once again stabilize communities, create identity, and broaden civic interactions through the reintegration of these structures into daily life.

Although divestment has largely been seen as a detrimental blow to the resource and the community, through the discussions around recent and past reuse schemes, and the value of the building's public program over its historic function, the future of these buildings is anything but bleak. The role of Section-commissioned artwork in these structures creates a strong argument for continued community access and the role of the building as a place for public engagement. Few structures, beyond the handful of locally landmarked interiors in the United States, have an inherent argument for continued public access, yet these structures have a strong case for access based solely on the presence of this significant body of

national art. Preservation, more and more, has moved towards a flexible understanding of how to interpret and understand community values, and reinterpreting the relationship between a community and its New Deal post office is an area in which this understanding can help to ensure the future significance of these structures.

Further study on the inherent conflicts of divestment and the need to clarify a number of issues – including the relationship between GSA and the USPS, the nature of the transfer of art assets in the 1970s, and the lack of clarity around the ownership of the cultural legacy created on behalf of the people – are essential to improving the relationship between the USPS and the communities that it is responsible for serving. Beyond these issues of policy and history, the need for better metrics, both for the benefit of the USPS's administrative decision making processes, and the better interpretation of this national resource, is an important next step in developing a cohesive body of knowledge to inform the future of these structures.

As the nation continues to move away from the ideology of the New Deal, and the idea of the cultural commons becomes more and more foreign to the political landscape, the power and presence expressed through the creation of the nation's one thousand public art galleries and the one thousand buildings that house them, should be interpreted as a monumental legacy to the power of national identity and the desire of government to stabilize the nation while bringing beauty and art to its people at a time of uncertainty. It is this legacy, envisioned to serve the people in perpetuity, that is currently in the hands of the United States Postal Service; yet, the communities that value these buildings must find a way to take on a more active and significant role in helping to determine the future of these places of community life and memory. The case studies, themes, and recommendations outlined here can help to guide many of these divestment conversations, but how communities participate and take on the role of stewardship will have the greatest effect on how effectively these buildings can embody the values of their unique legacy far into the future.

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