

Hamilton Main Post Office
340 Main Street
Hamilton
Ravalli County
Montana

HABS No. MT-84

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historical American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Rocky Mountain Regional Office
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 25287
Denver, Colorado 80225

**HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
HAMILTON MAIN POST OFFICE (FEDERAL BUILDING)**

I. INTRODUCTION

Location: 340 Main Street, Hamilton,
Ravalli County, Montana 59840

Quad: Hamilton South, Montana

UTM: Zone 11 718990mE, 5125220mN

Date of Construction: 1940

Present Owner: United States Government, Postal
Service

Original/Present Use: Post Office

Significance: The federally owned Hamilton Main Post Office serves as a "contributing" resource within the Hamilton Commercial Historic District. This building is representative of a variety of historical themes, including the federally funded building program of the Depression era, the standardization of architectural plans by the Treasury Department, and, on the local level, the growth and development of the Hamilton commercial district.

Historian: Elizabeth Butterfield, Historical
Research Associates, Inc., July
1991.

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF FEDERALLY FUNDED BUILDING PROJECTS

The second decade of the 20th century marked a period when the government began to pass legislation allocating money to communities for public buildings. The Public Buildings Commissions Report of 1914 outlined the regulations of plans for small federal buildings. In the Public Buildings Act of 1926, the Treasury Department received authority to furnish "suitable accommodations" for a wide variety of government services. This act provided for either new construction, or remodeling and/or enlargement of existing buildings. Furthermore, the Office of Supervising Architect secured permission to direct building design, estimates, and contracts.

In the area of post office construction, the Secretary of the Treasury and the Postmaster General jointly decided what towns and cities required improved facilities. Under the terms of the 1926 Act, a survey was conducted resulting in a report that identified over 2,300 towns and cities, operating with postal receipts over \$10,000, that had no postal facilities. Estimated construction costs for these buildings totalled \$170,420,000.00 (Anderson, 1985).

The crash of 1929 postponed the complete execution of the Public Buildings Act of 1926 and created a need for additional public funding legislation. By amending the 1926 Act in 1930, Congress consented to an increased amount of funding for public buildings. This amendment, dated March 31, 1930, fostered future public building legislation and facilitated a new direction for public works projects during the Roosevelt Administration. The amendment stated that no less than two post offices should be built in each state where postal receipts exceeded \$10,000.00 during the past year. In the Employment Stabilization Act of 1931, Congress promoted advanced planning and regulated construction, repairs, and alteration of public works projects in an effort to stabilize industry and increase employment. The use of public building programs to aid local economies represented an alteration in the federal spending policy.

Significant changes occurred in the Treasury Department in 1933. The Procurement Branch in the Division of Public Works received the authority to oversee the Supervising Architect's Office. Furthermore, the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933 established the Public Works Administration. By dispersing funds to both federal and non-federal agencies, the administration hoped to use a comprehensive program of public works construction to increase

employment. Between 1930 and 1939, the government allocated funds for the construction of over 1,800 post offices (Anderson 1985).

During the 1930s, the Treasury Department also provided money for the decoration of public buildings and parks. The agency specifically responsible for Post Office art was the Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture. In 1938, the name was changed to the Treasury Section of Fine Arts, and in 1940 to the Section of Fine Arts of the Public Buildings Administration of the Federal Works Agency (Marling 1982). Under this program, approximately one percent of a federal building's construction appropriation was allocated to the art projects. Representatives from small communities such as Hamilton selected the art work for federal buildings through contests, however the Treasury Department dictated the approved subject matter, which generally consisted of depictions of historical events of the local area (Marling 1982, Kolva 1985). As with all depression-era work relief projects, the United States' involvement in World War II curtailed operation of the program (Anderson 1985).

III. DEVELOPMENT OF THE TOWN OF HAMILTON

On September 4, 1890, one of Butte, Montana's "Copper Kings" (Marcus Daly) founded Hamilton, Montana. The new community received its name from James Hamilton, Daly's Chief Planner. The town of Hamilton, incorporated in 1894, became the Ravalli county seat in 1898. The growth of this community, situated in the center of Montana's Bitter Root Valley, revolved around agricultural and lumber industries. During the first decade of the 1900s, out-of-state land promoters advertised the Bitter Root Valley as exactly suited to the cultivation of apple orchards. However, this venture failed, and the population of the Bitter Root Valley remained static until the 1920s, when the area experienced a gradual increase in population, which continued until the 1940s. Even during the Depression era, the population of the county remained stable and the agricultural industry performed adequately in comparison to the rest of the United States (Anderson, 1985).

As a result of the population growth and the resulting increase in economic activity, the postal business in Hamilton also increased. In the thirty year period between 1910 and 1940, the postal receipts at Hamilton increased from \$13,269 to \$21,761 (U.S. Post Office, Hamilton, Montana, 1989). This increase in business sparked a community-based effort to establish a new federal building in Hamilton. Thus, early actions by the Hamilton Chamber of Commerce in 1935, efforts by the Lions Club, and the involvement of Congressman Jerry J. O'Connell jointly

worked together to lobby for the needed government funds. By 1937, Montana senators James E. Murray and B. K. Wheeler pledged their support to the federal building project.

On January 11, 1937, Congressman O'Connell wrote to the Fourth Assistant Postmaster General in Washington, D. C. The letter eloquently and effectively outlined the necessity of constructing a new federal building in Hamilton. First, the existing post office quarters in Hamilton inadequately housed the staff and inhibited efficient performance of their daily transactions. Moreover, the space shortage often required patrons to stand in line outside the post office. Second, a new federal building would house several federal agencies lacking proper space, which resulted in poor business handling. Third, in addition to providing efficient federal services to the Hamilton Community, a new federal building would alleviate the rental cost of Hamilton's federal agencies' current locations (*Western News*, January 21, 1937).

Congressman O'Connell received a telegram from the Fourth Assistant Postmaster General on September 24, 1938. It explained that the Postmaster General and Secretary of the Treasury had allocated \$80,000.00 for the establishment of a federal building at Hamilton, Montana. This allotment figure of \$80,000.00, based upon an old survey, was increased following an updated assessment by the federal department (*Western News*, September 29, 1938).¹

In conjunction with the design of the new federal building by the Office of the Supervising Architect, Public Buildings Administration, and Federal Works Agency, the Treasury Department Procurement Division in Washington, D.C., began the search for a building site for the Hamilton Main Post Office. On December 5, 1938, based upon the language contained in the Public Buildings Act approved May 25, 1926 and the Federal Public Buildings Appropriation Act of 1938, W. E. Reynold, Director of Procurement, accepted an offer by H.O. Bell and Theodore Reinbold to sell a tract of land at the intersection of Fourth Street and Main Street for \$3,450.00 (*Western News*, December 15, 1938). This 150 X 130-foot parcel (Block 26, Lots 12-17, OTH) was located on the western edge of Hamilton's downtown commercial district, and

¹ The original allotment of \$80,000.00 for the new federal building occurred under the terms of the Federal Public Buildings Appropriation Act of 1938. This act increased the total amount authorized for public building programs from 70,000,000 to 130,000,000. The Third Deficiency Appropriation Act of 1938 authorized an increase in the allotment for the new federal building from \$80,000.00 to \$100,000.00 (*Western News*, November 9, 1939).

had previously contained a building that housed a livery stable and an automobile repair shop (Michels and Powell, 1987).

On July 16, 1940, the Federal Works Agency granted the Hamilton Federal Building's construction contract to Mr. Benjamin H. Sheldon of Seattle, Washington, in the amount of \$75,936.00. The contract permitted Sheldon 300 days from the date of notice to finish construction. The contract also required that construction on the building be completed by July 31, 1941 (U. S. Post Office, Hamilton, Montana, 1989). Nelson Rector, superintendent of construction, supervised the project throughout its duration. Louis Friberg initially worked as the government's construction engineer. A member of the Army Corps of Engineers reserves, Major F. H. Parnell, took Friberg's position in February of 1941 (*Missoulian*, May 25, 1941).

The Hamilton Main Post Office was completed on May 28, 1941 (*Western News*, May 29, 1941). Harrison Parkman, Purchasing Agent for the Postal Service headquarters in Washington D.C., gave the dedication speech on July 26, 1941, declaring, "No one can foretell what the future holds, but we do know we are headed for a change. This is not new, the old world has changed many times before, but we must learn that we have to readjust our lives to change" (*Western News*, July 31, 1941). Certainly the lives of most families living in the Bitter Root Valley and the nation as a whole would be changed by America's involvement in World War II.

Today, the post office sits on the western edge of the Hamilton Commercial Historic District. The Hamilton Creamery, a "primary" building within the district, is located directly to the west, across 4th Street. To the east, is the "Bell-McCall" building which is also considered a "contributing" building.

IV. ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

Patterned after the standard designs developed in the Office of the Supervising Architect, Louis Simon, the Hamilton Main Post Office is representative of what previous researchers have described as "WPA Moderne" or Starved Classicism (Craig 1979). The building is built symmetrically in design with elements of a late classical style concept. The post office exemplifies the final stages of federal design evolution that progressed from the Beaux-Arts tradition of the early 1900s to the modern style of the 1930s.

Common bond-laid red brick encompasses the body of the one-story building. On the ground floor, brick retaining walls create wells which allow light into the basement windows. The flat front facade contains five bays — consisting of a central entrance bay flanked on either side by two window bays. The entrance displays aluminum framed and glass panel doors, surrounded by flat limestone trim. Six granite steps with wrought iron railing and a granite platform form the approach to the front entrance. The entry is lighted on the exterior by two, colonial style wrought iron lanterns, with one hung on each side of the entryway. Bronze letters forming the words "United States Post Office, Hamilton, Montana" are affixed to the brick facade above the main entry.

The four window bays also have flat limestone trim surrounding the six-over-nine wooden sash windows. The dimension of the sash windows contribute to the illusion of a tall building. Plain limestone panels descend from the bottom of the windows to the basement level. A simple limestone belt course circles the building, two feet below the top of the front wall, which is finished with a limestone coping course.

The east and west sides of the building each have three window bays, and are finished with the same materials and in the same manner as the front side of the building. The three window bays on the east side are identical to the window bays on the front. However the central bay on the west side has two small four-over-four light double hung wood sash windows, flanked on either side by a bay with six-over-nine light wooden sash windows.

The center of the rear facade contains a loading platform. Two symmetrical windows flank the platform. A red brick chimney projects from the rear facade's northeast corner. Four concrete steps provide access to the rear door. The back of the post office retains typical detailing, with the exception of a one-story addition and small loading dock. The loading dock bay includes two garage doors and a single swing door.

Several key features contribute to the sturdy construction of the post office. A concrete roof slab provides for the possibility of second floor expansion, and a flat composition roof covers the entire building. Concrete foundation walls and floor slabs contribute to the "fireproof" qualities of the building.

The grounds of the post office look pleasing to patrons. Grass, deciduous trees, and concrete park benches fill the lot. Trimmed bushes decorate the building's corners and entryway. During the spring and fall months, the green foliage frames the red brick building.

Entering the building from the front entrance, postal patrons encounter a thirteen foot wide public lobby. Plaster walls, with forty inch high wainscoting of Montana travertine marble, and a terrazzo floor decorate the lobby. The Postmaster's office is located in the west corner of the building. Four additional offices with a combined area of nine hundred and thirty square feet are tentatively assigned to the Department of Agriculture, Extension Service. One small 225 square foot office is unassigned (U. S. Post Office, Hamilton, Montana, 1989).

The workroom, located at the back of the building, contains 1,650 square feet and the connected financial section contains twenty-four square feet. In addition to windows in the exterior walls, two large skylights provide overhead light to the center of the workroom. The ground floor also houses a boiler room, a fuel room, carriers' swing room, and three postal storage rooms. The lobby of the post office contains a mural positioned over the Postmaster's office door. This oil on canvas mural is entitled "Flat Head War Party", and depicts a scene in the Bitter Root Valley wherein a small party of young Flathead braves is preparing to confront a Blackfeet war party intent upon stealing Flathead horses (Anderson, 1985).

Artist Henry J. Meloy, a native Montanan, completed the 6'15 1/4" X 14' painting in 1942 for the sum of \$800.00 (Missoula Post Office, January 1973). Born August 3, 1902 in Townsend, Montana, Meloy was one of 3,700 artists employed by the Public Works of Art Project. He received his formal training at the Art Institute of Chicago from 1923 to 1925, and later studied at the National Academy in New York City and with the Art Student League of New York. Thereafter, Meloy worked as a free lance artist from 1928 to 1933 in New York. During the Depression, under the direction of the Public Works of Art Project and Works Progress Administration, Meloy completed a wide variety of commissions. In 1940, Meloy began a teaching career at Columbia University, where he remained until his death in 1951 (Anderson 1985).

The mural, completed under the auspices of the Treasury Department's Section of Painting and Sculpture, is notable as one of six such post office murals located in the state of Montana. The mural is protected under an agreement, dated October 10, 1975, between the United States Postal Service and the National Collection of Fine Arts of the Smithsonian Institute (Anderson 1985).

V. REFERENCES CITED

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- 1938a "Funds Allotted For A Federal Building To Be Built In City," September 29.
- 1938b "Word Is Received That Post Office Site For Hamilton Has Been Accepted," December 15.
- 1939 "Spring Will See Construction on Federal Building Start in Hamilton," November 9.
- 1941a "New Post Office Opened in Hamilton Yesterday," May 29.
- 1941b "New Park and Post Office at Hamilton Dedicated Saturday: Parkman is Speaker," July 31.



Hamilton Post Office Mural, 340 Main Street, Hamilton, Montana, 59840

ARTIST: Henry J. MeLoy (1902-1951)

TITLE: "Flat Head War Party"

DATE: 1942 MEDIUM: Oil on Canvas SIZE: 77 1/2 x 168 inches

SPONSOR: Treasury Department's Section of Painting and Sculpture

CONDITION WHEN PHOTOGRAPHED: Excellent DATE PHOTOGRAPHED: November 2, 1987

PHOTOGRAPHER: Don Beatty PHOTOGRAPHY SPONSOR: The L.J. Skaggs and Mary C. Skaggs Foundation

SOURCE: Museum Program, Montana Historical Society, 225 N. Roberts, Helena, Montana 59620-9990