U.S. Immigrant Station and Assay Office
(INS Building)
815 Airport Way
Seattle
King County
Washington

HABS No. WA-215

HABS
WASH
17-SEAT,
18-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Columbia Cascade System Support Office
National Park Service
909 First Avenue
Seattle, Washington 98104-1060

HABS
WASH
17-SEAT,
18-

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

U.S. IMMIGRANT STATION AND ASSAY OFFICE
(INS Building)

HABS No. WA-215

Location:	815 Airport Way, at the intersection of 6th Avenue South Seattle, King County, Washington U.S.G.S. Seattle North 7.5' Quadrangle, Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates: 10/550690/5271320
Present Owner:	Northwest Arctic Region, General Services Administration
Present Occupants:	Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS)
Present Use:	Immigration Facility and Detention Center
Significance:	The U.S. Immigrant Station and Assay Office (Federal Building, Immigration and Naturalization Service), is significant both architecturally and culturally. Built for the Immigration and Naturalization Service, the low-scaled, brick-faced building is a well-preserved example of the classically-derived Mediterranean Revival Style. It was designed in 1929 under the supervision of the U.S. Treasury Department which, at the time, encouraged the use of the understated, restrained, classical revival style for federal buildings across the country. In this nation-wide context, the building is significant as a well-proportioned, simply detailed example of that style. When completed in 1931, the building housed both U.S. Immigration Offices and Detention Facilities, which served primarily as a detention center for undocumented Chinese immigrants, and a U.S. Assay Facility, which was first opened primarily to analyze the gold and silver brought from Alaska and Canada during the Klondike Gold Rush. These two seemingly unrelated agencies have individual histories that contribute to the historic significance of the building.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The U.S. Immigrant Station and Assay Office, known also as the INS Building, is significant both architecturally and culturally. Built for the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), the low, brick-faced building is a well-preserved example of the classically-derived Mediterranean Revival Style. The building's exterior has remained virtually unchanged since its construction. It was designed in 1929 under the supervision of Judge James A. Wetmore, the Acting Supervising Architect of the U.S. Treasury Department, and Louis A. Simon, Superintendent of the Architectural Section of the Supervising Architect's Office. During their tenures at the Treasury Department, from 1905 to 1940, Wetmore and Simon encouraged the use of understated, restrained, classical revival styles for federal buildings across the country. In this nation-wide context, the INS Building is significant as a well-proportioned, simply detailed example of the Mediterranean Revival Style. The building was built on property originally purchased for the construction of a new post office. The Department of Labor, which once administered the immigration processes in this country, was authorized $100,000 to purchase the site for use as an Immigration Station when the federal government decided not to build a post office there. Construction of the new building began in 1930. The General Contractor was Elvind Anderson of Tacoma, Washington; the construction bid was $517,880. When completed in 1931, the building housed both U.S. Immigration Offices and Detention Facilities on the first three floors, and a U.S. Assay Facility on the fourth floor. These two seemingly unrelated agencies have individual histories that contribute to significance of the building.

IMMIGRATION STATION

As the volume of immigrants to the United States increased at the turn of the 20th Century, the federal laws governing potential immigrants became more stringent. As a consequence, the number of aliens detained for lack of sufficient documentation increased. For security reasons, aliens who were being investigated were detained in the same facility where their applications were being processed. As a result, large immigration stations were constructed to handle the high volumes of immigrants applying for residency in the United States. Among the largest stations were those in New York (Ellis Island), constructed between 1892-1897; Honolulu, constructed in 1905; and San Francisco (Angel Island), constructed between 1906-1909. In 1916, approximately 3,500 of the 900,000 immigrants who passed through Seattle's immigration station were investigated and over 500 actually deported. It was reported that as many as 750 were detained on site at one time. By 1929, the station originally located near Smith Cove had become inadequate for processing and detention.

The new U.S. Immigrant Station and Assay Office was constructed following the period of greatest immigration into the United States. The facility was modern and spacious, and designed to relieve the pressures on the existing station. It served primarily as a detention center for Chinese immigrants who, due to the Chinese Exclusion Act, were detained and investigated intensely. The facility provided for the segregation of Chinese and white immigrants, with separate dormitory spaces for women, men and boys, secure recreation areas, and a kitchen equipped primarily for Chinese cooking. When Chinese immigration diminished rapidly during World War II, the Seattle INS facility was used primarily to detain Europeans facing deportation. A newspaper from January 1941 noted that almost every European nation was represented among its 130 detainees. Following the war, the facility served primarily to manage immigration in Washington State and the Pacific Northwest Region. Between 1950 and 1987, many of the unused detention areas in the building were converted to office and support spaces for the Immigration Service. In 1987, a major remodeling was undertaken to

incorporate both minimum and high security detention areas. At the time of this HABS report, there were approximately 170 detainees -- with stays averaging two to six months (the longest is said to be twenty-eight months at the present time).

ASSAY OFFICE

The U.S. Assay Office in Seattle was first authorized in 1898. It was opened primarily in response to the Klondike Gold Rush, to analyze the gold and silver content of the bullion brought through Seattle by miners journeying to and from Alaska and Canada. The bullion analysis created the opportunity for the U.S. Government to determine a fair price for the metal and purchase it from them. In the period from 1898 to 1918, over $174 million in Alaskan gold bullion was purchased by the U.S. Government through the Seattle Assay Office. At the time of construction of the new U.S. Immigrant Station and Assay Office, the existing assay facility had become inadequate. The federal government decided to relocate the facility to the fourth floor of the new immigration facility. The necessary chimneys, outlets, and equipment for weighing, analyzing and processing the metal and ore were subsequently incorporated into the new building design. Although unrelated in function, the 24-hour guards on duty for the INS Detention Facilities in the building prevented robbery attempts at the assay facility when it was in operation. When the Assay Office eventually closed in 1955, it was the last of its kind in the U.S. Treasury Department; over $658 million worth of gold had been processed there during its 57 years of operation.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

The U.S. Immigrant Station and Assay Office is located south of Seattle's downtown core, in a light industrial zone. The front of the building faces in a northeasterly direction onto Airport Way at the intersection of 6th Avenue South. When first constructed, the building was surrounded by low industrial buildings. Today, the site is dominated by the Kingdome Sports Facility, two blocks to the northwest, and elevated highway access ramps that wrap the building's northwest and southwest sides. Seattle's designated Pioneer Square National Historic District and the International District are located a few blocks to the northwest and northeast respectively. Directly to the southwest of the building site, there is a privately owned parking lot used for abandoned vehicle storage and auctions.

The rectangular site, originally reclaimed from Puget Sound tide flats, slopes evenly but steeply from the northeast to the southwest, exposing the basement level at the back of the building. The building is situated in approximately the center of the 275' x 150' site. A public concrete sidewalk extends along the street in front of the building and concrete sidewalks connect the three entry doors to the public way. There is grass lawn between the sidewalks and the building, and simple foundation planting adjacent to the building. On the northwest and southeast sides of the building, driveway ramps lead down to a parking lot at the basement level. The driveways and parking area are secured with perimeter chain-link and barbed wire fencing, and security gates on each side.

EXTERIOR

The exterior of the building exhibits a simple, yet monumental form. It is classical in design, employing Mediterranean Revival qualities in such features as red mission tile roofing and marble columns, arched windows, decorative wrought iron transom lights, and terra-cotta soffit and belt course decorations. The building is classically divided into three major vertical components; a four story central section is flanked by three story pavilions to the northeast and southeast. The primary exterior face material is standard sized buff-colored brick laid in a common bond.

The brick at the first floor level is laid up in bands to give a rusticated appearance, and as such serves as a visual base for the three stories above. The facades are banded by a molded terra-cotta water table that surrounds the building between the first and second floors, a brightly colored terra-cotta spiral belt course between the third and fourth floors, and a molded terra-cotta cornice and decorative soffit at the eave level of the center section. The primary facade has a series of round arched doorway openings, with brick voussoirs and large flanking lanterns that lend visual emphasis to the entries.

The basement and the first floor fill out the entire 240' x 82' footprint of the building. The northeast and northwest side sections, 36' x 82' each, rise three stories from the first floor, and are topped with flat composition roofs, concealed behind a terra-cotta parapet. The 168' x 37' center section rises to a fourth story. It is stepped back from the primary facade approximately one foot, and is capped with a mission tile, hipped roof. In plan, the second and third floors are "E-shaped" with legs projecting towards the back (southwest) of the building. The fourth floor is "T-shaped" in plan and rests on the "E-shape" of the third floor. Typically, the windows are steel industrial sash, awning type, divided into three, four or five horizontal sections. The majority of the windows, except those on the first and fourth floors have bars on the interior for security reasons.

STRUCTURE

Because the building was constructed on a site reclaimed from tide flats, composite wood and reinforced concrete pilings were used to form the foundation. Continuous reinforced concrete pile caps top the pilings. Above the foundation, the structure is reinforced concrete post and beam construction. At the basement level, most of the walls are poured-in-place concrete. Above the basement, the interior walls are primarily constructed of hollow clay tile, some with an exposed glazed finish, others with a smooth skim coat of plaster over the hollow tile bricks. The structure of the hipped roof is simple steel trusses, with dormers framed in wood. The flat roofs at the side pavilions and at the elevator penthouse are constructed of concrete.

INTERIOR

Typically, the interior historic finishes of the building are simple, durable, and well detailed. The walls of the entry vestibules, stairwells and upper floor corridors are of glazed structural terra-cotta tile. On the first floor, most of the exposed columns and pilasters are also wrapped in terra-cotta tile. The colors of the glazed terra-cotta vary in shades of orange, light brown or buff. In many public areas, the lower section of the walls are slightly darker in color than the upper areas. The interior, non-tiled, walls are constructed mostly of painted veneer plaster, and are typically off-white in color. The painted plaster ceilings are also typically off-white in color. The floors of the main entry lobby and vestibule are quarry tile with simple geometric banding. The first floor corridor floors are terrazzo with a perimeter marble edging and a base of marble. Office areas are typically carpeted. (Original drawings indicate that these areas were mastic tile.) Most of the original mastic floor tile in the upper floor corridors has been replaced or covered with vinyl tile or carpet, although much of the original tile cove base still remains. Ceiling heights throughout the building range from eleven to thirteen feet above the finish floor, except in offices where the non-historic acoustic tile ceilings are suspended below the structure. In some cases, the concrete post and beam structure is exposed, and is covered with a plaster veneer.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. ORIGINAL ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN DRAWINGS (reproductions from General Services Administration (GSA), Northwest Arctic Region (Auburn, WA), microfiche are included in the photographic documentation portion of this report).

B. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Community Services Collaborative (CSC), Architecture/Planning/Preservation. Historic Structures Report, Boulder, 1984.

The Conservation Company. National Register of Historic Places Inventory - Nomination Form, Seattle, 1978.

Boyle • Wagoner Architects. Historic Building Preservation Plan, Seattle, 1993.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

The present owner of the building, the General Services Administration, is considering relinquishing ownership of the building some time in the future. It is not in imminent danger of major modifications, or demolition, at this time. The building is managed by the GSA's Northwest Arctic Region in Auburn, Washington.