

Riggs National Bank
1503-1505 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington
District of Columbia

HABS No. DC-543

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
RIGGS NATIONAL BANK

HABS No. DC-543

Location: 1503-1505 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Washington, District of Columbia, 20005. The Headquarters building is located just west of the northwest corner of 15th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue.

Present Owner
and Occupant: Riggs National Bank

Present Use: Banking and associated office uses

Significance: The Riggs National Bank building is located at the center of Washington's financial district. The Roman, Ionic facade of the bank faces Robert Mills' United States Treasury building, itself a National Landmark and one of the finest examples of the Greek Revival period in the United States. Symbolically, the Neo-Classical Riggs Bank facade represents its close relationship to the work of the United States Treasury, and by implication, the important role it has played in public and private financial transactions in the Nation's Capital. The Riggs Bank presents an elegant example of the restrained classical facade employed at the turn of the century for important city banks. The use of the Neo-Classical had gained acceptance a decade earlier following the Chicago World's Fair. Neo-Classicism became the style of the City Beautiful movement and was espoused in Washington by the McMillan Commission. The architectural importance of the Riggs Bank was again recognized during the 1960s when it was selected by the Joint Committee on Landmarks as a Category II Landmark. It is also listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1899-1902, addition 1922-1924.

2. Architects: Edward Palmer York (1865-1924) and Philip Sawyer (1868-1949) designed the headquarters building for the Riggs National Bank, which was constructed between 1899 and 1902 at 1503 Pennsylvania Avenue. Only a few years later York and Sawyer designed and constructed the American Security and Trust Company at the corner of 15th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue. (See HABS No. DC-544.) York and Sawyer, a New York firm, specialized in the design of banking houses, hospitals, and government buildings. Mr. York and Mr. Sawyer had worked together in the offices of McKim, Mead and White prior to forming their partnership, which endured until the death of Mr. York. Mr. Sawyer studied architecture both at Columbia University and the Ecole des Beaux Arts. Mr. York prepared for the practice of architecture at Cornell University. Between 1909 and 1913 York & Sawyer served as consultants on the Treasury building, where in an effort to satisfy demands for more space they were responsible for a rationalization and clarification of the interior plan.

Appleton P. Clark, Jr.: Appleton P. Clark, Jr. (1865-1955) was a Washington architect. Prior to establishing his own office, Mr. Clark worked with A.B. Mullet, and later travelled extensively in Europe. Deeply involved in civic work in the District of Columbia, Mr. Clark was responsible for the design of many buildings in Washington during the period 1900 to 1940. Mr. Clark was recognized for his contextual designs, his discerning compositions, and his attention to detail and proportion. His compositions were often symmetrical and focused strongly on the center point of the facade. Mr. Clark designed the large wing for the headquarters building, which was located at 1505 Pennsylvania Avenue, between 1922 and 1924. (Lecture by Betty Bird, 12 June 1986, Washington, D.C.)

John Blatteau, Philadelphia architect and teacher (1986) has designed the restoration of the central banking room.

3. Original and Subsequent Owners: In 1845 William W. Corcoran and George W. Riggs purchased the land at the corner of 15th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue. The corner lot, Lot 1 (or 29) at 1501 Pennsylvania Avenue, was the location of the then defunct Bank of the United States, said to have been designed by George Hadfield. This building housed the Riggs Bank for more than fifty years. During that time the house for the cashier of the Riggs Bank was located just to the west at 1503 Pennsylvania Avenue, on lot 2 (or lot 30). This lot would later become the site of the new Riggs Bank headquarters building. Lot 3 (lot 33) at 1505 Pennsylvania Avenue would later become the site of the west wing of the Riggs Bank. Following the construction of the Riggs Bank headquarters building in 1902, the Hadfield building was demolished, and the corner lot was sold to the American Security and Trust Company for the construction of its new headquarters building. The headquarters building of this company, which later became the American Security Corporation, was designed to relate in such an integral fashion to the Riggs Bank that the two banks are often seen as one building. Originally the American Security and Trust Company fronted on 15th Street.

Later the bank remodelled its Pennsylvania Avenue window into a doorway, thus achieving a Pennsylvania Avenue address. In 1896 Riggs and Company became the Riggs National Bank. It was the Riggs National Bank which constructed the headquarters building and has retained ownership since that time.

4. Builders: Not known. The building permit for the construction of the headquarters building (1899-1902) was not located. Permit No. 9814, dated March 30, 1922, lists George A. Fuller Company as the builder for the 1922-1924 west wing addition.
5. Original Plans and Construction: Several original drawings, including a reflection of the ceiling of the banking hall, an elevation of the entrance, and a transit section at the rear of the banking hall, are located in the Riggs Bank archives. The bank collection also includes a full set of Appleton P. Clark's drawings for the 1922 addition. As was customary at the time, there were no specifications. Plans for the western addition, and for the many renovations and changes are also located in the Bank.

An article by Philip Sawyer, "The Planning of Bank Buildings" (Architectural Review, v. 12, p. 24-31, 1905), and an article on the Riggs National Bank (Architectural Record, v. 17, p 435-437, May 1905) describe the new headquarters building as an excellent example of the kind of bank building which was then being erected for prestigious banks. The articles note that these banks were generally designed in a "severely classical way", and that this kind of institutional design developed naturally out of a plan which provided a single, well-lighted counting room, usually illuminated by a skylight. In this type of floor plan, characterized by Mr. Sawyer as a "cockpit" plan, the open space was surrounded by counters thus eliminating the need for providing marble wainscoting. In the Riggs Bank a pedimented vault broke through the counter in the rear directly opposite the axial entrance way. (See photograph: Architectural Review, v. 12, p 24-31, 1905).

6. Additions and Alterations: Shortly after the completion of the Riggs Bank building, the Riggs Company sold the corner lot to the American Security and Trust Company (now the American Security Bank). In 1904 and 1905 that bank constructed a headquarters building which functions, visually, as a wing to the Riggs headquarters building. Attached on the east, this building complements the Riggs Bank in style, scale, mass and materials. "The designs of the two buildings are so harmonious that they are often thought to be one building. Together they form a monumental corner grouping which contrasts dramatically with the High Victorian, red brick, National Savings and Trust Company, a Category II Landmark, across 15th Street." (National Register Nomination Form) (See photograph of the Pennsylvania Avenue facade of the two banks, c. 1905 in the "Recent Work of York & Sawyer", Architectural Review, v. 16, p 97-116, 1909.)

In 1922-1924 the west wing of the Riggs National Bank was constructed by Appleton P. Clark, Jr. in a manner so sensitive to the original that it is now difficult to tell exactly where the west wing addition begins. (Betty Bird) The addition and the original building have the same roof line but the addition contains five main floors, a basement, and a partial sixth floor for utilities. Sympathetic as the two facades are, an earlier plan proposed by Mr. Clark incorporated the American Security and Trust Building and the proposed west wing into a facade which read unequivocally as one building. (See HABS Field Records, Appleton P. Clark drawings, Elevations.) This original proposal, illustrated in elevations Nos. 7 and 8, shows the west wing as the mirror image of the American Security and Trust Building. Apparently, the Riggs Bank wished to emphasize its separate identity. Revised elevations, Nos. 7A and 8A, show that the west wing follows the detail and proportion of the Riggs bank itself to a much greater extent than was the case in elevations Nos. 7 and 8. Today the asymmetrical but ordered main facade of the Riggs Bank, itself, retains its 1924 appearance. A door, providing a Pennsylvania Avenue address for the American Security and Trust Company, has been substituted for the original window.

Extensive interior alterations have been undertaken including the addition of balconies at the time the west wing was built under the direction of Appleton P. Clark, and later balcony additions and modifications during the 1920s and 1930s. The balconies were enclosed at one time, and later opened up again. At the present time (1986) the interior space is being remodelled to conform to the extent possible to the 1902 appearance under the direction of John Blatteau, a Philadelphia architect.

B. Historical Context:

The origins of the Riggs National Bank could be said to go back to the time when William W. Corcoran, former employee of the Second Bank of the United States, took advantage of President Andrew Jackson's destruction of that bank to get a foot in the door of the banking world by opening a brokerage business on 15th Street. In 1840 Corcoran entered into partnership with George W. Riggs and they founded a bank of deposit. Five years later they purchased the Second Bank of the United States at the corner of 15th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, where the bank remained until the new building had been constructed next door at 1503 Pennsylvania Avenue in 1902. Corcoran withdrew from the firm in 1854 in order to devote his energy to civic projects, including the founding of the Corcoran Gallery and the arrangement for the transfer to the public domain of hundreds of acres for future park lands. At that time George Riggs formed a partnership with his half brother, Elisha Riggs Jr., as Riggs and Co. Following the death of George W. Riggs in 1881, Charles Carroll Glover, the third important figure associated with the Riggs Bank, became a vice president and later president, in which capacity he remained at the bank until 1921.

The first coup by Corcoran & Riggs was accomplished in 1847 when they were able to make a substantial profit by taking the entire first Mexican War loan and reselling it. In 1848 the firm also took the entire second and third Mexican War loans but had to sell \$5,000,000 worth of bonds in London banking houses. This action established the credibility of the firm and, additionally, it put the foreign credit of the United States on a firm footing. (Washington Post, May 1, 1904). In March of 1868 the treaty for the purchase of Alaska by the United States from Russia was signed in the home of William H. Seward at 719 Madison Place. The price was \$7,200,000 in gold. In order to implement the treaty, Congress had to appropriate the money. At the request of the United States Government, Riggs and Co. undertook to accumulate the necessary gold. This goal was achieved by the end of July of 1868, and the gold coin was paid over to the Russians at the Riggs National Bank, then located in the old Bank of the United States building. (The Georgetowner, 17 July 1956.)

Riggs Bank has served many prominent people including 17 presidents. It is sometimes, therefore, called the President's Bank. Others holding accounts with the the Riggs bank included Francis Scott Key, General Winfield Scott, Daniel Webster, Henry Clay, Stephen Douglas, Sam Houston, and Brigham Young. Following the Civil War, Riggs and Co. eliminated the final \$201.80 of President Abraham Lincoln's account, along with hundreds of small accounts for dead Civil War soldiers. (Washington Post, 11 February 1953, files of the National Capital Planning Commission.)

Riggs and Co. prospered following the Civil War. The new building was built to match its status as a National Bank. Of the old building the Washington Post reported nostalgically, "In America ... even such an old and powerful institution as ... [the Riggs National Bank] does not neglect the outward appearance of things to such an extent as is sometimes done in London, and when the Riggs National Bank was formed the new building adjoining on the west was built for it, one of the bank palaces of the country. Since that time...[the old Second Bank] has been vacant, and gathering cobwebs and dust, and the President and cabinet members and members of Congress and diplomats who once went through its doors have passed it by without a thought to the new building." (Washington Post, 1 May 1904.) The old building referred to was, of course, the Bank of the United States building attributed to George Hadfield, and supplanted in 1902 by the York & Sawyer building. Nothing quite so dramatic as the accumulation of the gold for the Alaskan payment has taken place in the new building. However, the Riggs Bank operated as an important stabilizing influence during the Depression of the 1930s.

The vaults of the Riggs National Bank contain many papers of historical interest.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The Riggs National Bank is an excellent example of the Neo-Classical revival style popular by the turn of the century for banks. The "cockpit" plan, which surrounds the open central space with counters, represents one of two or three common plans for banks of that period. As in the case of the Riggs Bank the vault is often located at the rear of the counting room directly opposite the axial entrance. The strictly classical facade is also typical of the Neo-Classical bank. But more significantly, the Riggs Bank building exemplifies the sensitivity of entrepreneurs of the period, working within the ideology of the City Beautiful Movement, to the relationships among buildings, and to such planning concerns as quality of the White House precinct, and identity of the financial district.
2. Condition of fabric: excellent.

B. Description of Exterior

1. Overall dimensions: The dimensions of the original building and the west wing are: South (front) facade, 80.2'; west facade, 111'; east facade (now attached to the American Security and Trust building), 130.2'. (The main building originally measured 53.667' along the south facade, the addition measured 26.5' along the south facade making a total of 80.2'.) The south facade of the Riggs Bank consists of two bays, the main building and the addition to the west. However, because the American Security Corporation building reads as a part of the same structure, that building reads as a third bay to the east. As originally constructed the main building contained only one story and a basement.
2. Foundations: granite.
3. Walls: The narrow, pedimented facade is constructed of smooth, white ashlar granite; it contains a full entablature with modillions and dentils. Two Ionic columns in antis complement the Ionic-columned portico of the Treasury building across Pennsylvania Avenue. Under the pediment is a decorated frieze which includes the words "RIGGS NATIONAL BANK". A carved eagle and high-relief floral elements fill the pediment. The Ionic columns in antis are framed by plain, ashlar masonry pilasters which show off the bronze light stanchions supported by griffins. To the west the entablature of the pedimented bay continues

across the addition, and to the east it extends across the American Security and Trust building. The pedimented main bay projects from the facade. Below the entablature of the west bay there is a recessed area. Although the entablature also continues on the west facade, the cornice of the west facade is much simpler than that of the main facade. The five bays of the west facade are separated by pilasters, which are set between the massive corner pilasters. The rear wall is brick laid in stretchers.

4. Structural System: Bearing wall masonry construction.
5. Openings: The doorway of the pedimented facade is enriched by the incision of trim in Greek motifs, and an entablature above, supported on consoles. Paired windows flank the doorway. Above the doorway and windows there is a large, multiple-light window secured by bronze-colored metal framing. The original interior was lighted by a large window behind the vault, now largely obscured by heavy balconies, and from the skylight above, which does not appear to have been constructed originally with a stained glass border. (See illustration in: "The Planning of Bank Buildings" Architectural Review, v. 12, pp. 24-31, 1905.) A window in the first floor of the west wing balanced the first-floor window of the American Security Bank building (now a doorway). Above, a large, multiple-lighted window provides light for the upper floors. Each of the five bays of the west facade has a first-story window divided into nine lights; second- and third-story windows which form a single panel; a fourth-story window which is placed in the frieze; and a fifth-story window which is hidden by the parapet. The openings conform to the proportions of the main facade.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: The building originally consisted of a single room four stories high surrounded by "U" shaped counters, broken at the rear by the pedimented vault. The original interior contained no balconies. When the west wing was built balconies which opened onto the main space were added. They were at one time enclosed to provide more space, and later opened up again. The west wing extends the marble paneled banking room on the first floor, and contains office space above.

2. Stairway: A notable stairway of Botticino marble is located to the west of the main entrance leading to the present day vaults in the basement. (Notes of T. Robins Brown, architectural historian, dated 12 February 1973, NCPC Files.)
3. Flooring: The marble floors, stairway, and counters are of marble taken from Italian, Vermont, and Tennessee quarries, and laid in various colors and patterns. The floor border of is Vermont Verde antique marble surrounding light, Tennessee marble. (Notes of T. Robins Brown, architectural historian, dated 13 February 1973, NCPC files.)
4. Wall and ceiling finish: The central, gabled skylight runs north and south, and is surrounded by a border which is predominantly green and yellow-gold in color. The solid pediments at each end are painted gold. The skylight is surrounded by rectangular panels and rosettes which are inset in the ceiling. The east and west walls are each divided into bays by six fluted Ionic, marble pilasters set above 12' of marble paneling. The pilasters support a full entablature with enriched moldings, painted gold. (National Register Nomination Form.) The dominant interior colors are gold and white. Although the interior of rich and elaborate Neo-Classical decoration dates from the alterations of 1922-24 when the west wing was added, the ceiling also suggests art nouveau influences. The marble-grained counters are of pavanazzo marble with antique brass. (Notes of T. Robins Brown, op. cit.) Interior alterations to renovate to the original 1902 decor are now in progress.

D Site:

As mentioned above, the architects were very much aware of the importance of relating the Riggs National Bank to the Treasury building across Pennsylvania Avenue, and to the need for providing dignity at the heart of Washington's financial district, and within the White House precinct. This was accomplished by the Neo-Classical facade which reflects the Greek revival facade of the Treasury building, and forms a suitable part of the formal building complex of the White House precinct. The Riggs National Bank faces south on Pennsylvania Avenue: to the west is an alley and to the east is the American Security and Trust building.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Bibliography:

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PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

The historical and architectural information for the Riggs National Bank were compiled in 1986 by Marion K. Schlefer, Historic American Buildings Survey.