
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 15-16

United States Department of Agriculture Cotton Annex

300 12th Street SW
Square 326, Lot 805

Meeting Date: July 23, 2015
Applicant: United States of American, General Services Administration
Affected ANC: 6D
Staff Reviewer: Kim Williams

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate the USDA Cotton Annex at 300 12th Street SW as a historic landmark to be listed in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites, and requests that the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places.

Preservation Background

The Cotton Annex building is currently undergoing a Section 106 review. The General Services Administration is entering into an agreement to exchange this property, along with its Regional Office Building property, for construction services related to the renovation of the GSA Headquarters building at 1800 F Street NW and for the adaptive re-use of up to three historic buildings on the Department of Homeland Security Headquarters Campus located at St. Elizabeths West Campus. As part of the Section 106 process, GSA has determined that the Cotton Exchange building is eligible for listing in the National Register, and has completed the National Register of Historic Places nomination that is the subject of this case. Section 106 consultation is continuing to determine the possible effects that the proposed undertaking will have on the Cotton Annex and other historic properties.

History and Architecture

The Cotton Annex building was constructed in 1936-37 for the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) for its Bureau of Agricultural Economics (BAE) to house offices and laboratories “dedicated to research, service, and regulatory work centering on the standardization and marketing of cotton, hay, wool, and a number of other products.” From its opening until 1964, the implementation of cotton standards was one of the building’s most important functions. These standards, codified with passage of the United States Cotton Futures Act of 1914, were established by the USDA and provided a set of physical criteria by which to evaluate the grade of color, length, and strength of cotton, along with other qualities and properties. The standards were established as variations in climate, soil, farming practices, and genetics resulted in varying quality attributes of cotton. Further, the criteria used to describe American-grown cotton at sale were inconsistent, resulting in variations in both quality and price from market to market.



The Cotton Exchange Building was designed to house both the office and laboratory functions of the BAE whose then-existing headquarters were being demolished as part of the expansion of the Bureau of Engraving and Printing. The site selected for the new building was located in Southwest, south of the Mall, in accordance with the 1901 McMillan Commission Plan that called for Federal buildings to be constructed south of Constitution and Independence Avenues. The building was constructed with funds appropriated by Congress as part of the 1926 Public Buildings Act.

Designed by Supervising Architect of the Treasury, Louis A. Simon, the Cotton Annex is a six-story brick building designed in a Stripped Classical style indicative of Simon's other federal work. The building has distinctive walls of variegated buff-colored brick laid in an all-stretcher bond, and is covered with a flat roof with limestone coping and a tall parapet roof on the west and north elevations. Original plans for the building indicate that it was designed for later expansion to the south and east; however, this expansion never occurred, leaving the east and south elevations devoid of architectural ornamentation. With the exception of a six-story stairwell addition located on the south elevation built circa 1986, the exterior has seen no major alterations or additions.

The Cotton Exchange and the nearby Department of Agriculture South Building, also designed under the direction of Louis Simon and sharing similarly design elements to it, were clearly intended to be subordinate buildings to the 1904-1908 limestone-clad Department of Agriculture complex located on the National Mall and designed in a monumental Classical Revival-style. Despite its secondary status, the Cotton Annex is a successful example of Stripped Classicism, especially as it establishes a strong association with the Classicism of Federal architecture, while

simultaneously responding to very specific programmatic needs of a warehouse/laboratory that would be the “last word in equipment and lighting arrangement.”

The main portion of the building fronting 12th and C Streets primarily housed offices while the southern end wing contained warehousing for storage as well as large, open laboratories. Millions of pounds of cotton were stored in the warehouse section that featured a state-of-the-art fireproof system. Laboratories, specifically designed for identification and standardization activities, were laid out at the northern end of the wing which provided the optimum lighting conditions. The hay laboratory, located on the fifth floor of the northern wing had large bands of windows for natural light, while north-facing skylights illuminated the cotton standards laboratories on the sixth floor. As initially planned, but never implemented and thus explaining the unarticulated nature of the south and east elevations, the Cotton Annex was designed to encompass the entire block bounded by 11th and 12th and C and D Streets, SW with a large interior courtyard.

The Cotton Annex served as the headquarters of the USDA Cotton Division from completion of the building in 1937 until 1964 at which time the Standards section of the Cotton Division moved to Memphis, TN. Although offices of the Cotton Division remained in the Cotton Annex until 1982, other divisions of the USDA had moved into those laboratory spaces that had been devoted to cotton standardization activities. After 1982, GSA acquired ownership of the federal building and while it continued to have government offices in the building until 2010, the building is now vacant.

Evaluation Criteria:

The Cotton Annex building meets District of Columbia Designation Criterion B (“History”) and National Register Criterion A, at the national level of significance in the areas of agriculture and commerce, for its association with the USDA’s Bureau of Agricultural Economics (BAE), responsible for developing the processes for cotton classification and standardization. The building was erected specifically to aid in the classification and standardization of cotton, a system that continues to serve as the basis for the valuation and utilization of cotton bales in the United States.

The Cotton Annex also meets D.C. Designation Criteria D (Architecture and Urbanism) and National Register Criterion C, at the local level of significance as an excellent example of Stripped Classicism, particularly as it pertains to federal architecture. a style preferred by Louis A. Simon, Supervising Architect of the Treasury.

The Period of Significance for the Cotton Annex extends from 1937 when the building was completed until 1964 when the Standards section of the Cotton Division moved out of the building.