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**HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD**

Historic Landmark Case No. 16-08

**U.S. Post Office Department Mail Equipment Shops**

2135 5<sup>th</sup> Street NE  
Square 3620, Lot 814

Meeting Date: May 26, 2016  
Applicant: United States Postal Service (owner)  
Affected ANC: 5E<sup>1</sup>

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The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate the U.S. Postal Service Mail Equipment Shops, 2135 5<sup>th</sup> Street NE, a historic landmark in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites, and that it recommend the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places for listing as of local significance, with a period of significance of 1918 to 1966, i.e., from the date of the building's completion until 1966, a date 50 years before the present, but while the building was still being used for its original purpose.

The Postal Service has submitted this nomination in accordance with its responsibilities under Section 110 of the National Historic Preservation Act and, in anticipation of selling the property, to put in place permanent protections to avoid future adverse effects, pursuant to the Section 106 regulations. The Postal Service anticipates submitting the completed nomination directly to the National Register of Historic Places.

In March 2015, the National Register formally determined the Mail Equipment Shops eligible for listing:

This two-story, poured-in-place concrete industrial building erected in 1918, is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places for its historic significance under National Register Criterion A for its role as the sole equipment shop for the nation's entire postal system for much of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The building housed hundreds of employees who manufactured millions of mails sacks and hundreds of thousands of postal locks every year, designed and patented various pieces of postal equipment, and yearly cleaned and repaired millions of mail sacks; all of these functions were vital to the operation of the postal system. From its construction in 1918 until 2013, the Washington Mail Equipment Shops has been in continual use for postal-related manufacturing; goods and services manufactured and provided here affected the entire postal system. The building is also eligible for its

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of compiling this report, the Historic Preservation had not received a resolution from the affected Advisory Neighborhood Commission on the subject of the proposed designation. In fact, HPO has received no letters on the subject.

architectural importance under National Register Criterion C as a significant, early example in Washington, D.C., of a fire-proof concrete construction in a federal warehouse. The building retains historic integrity; alterations to the building, such as the replacement of original windows and doors and the enclosure of some bays are typical for such industrial facilities and have not destroyed the building's historic integrity as an early 20<sup>th</sup>-century manufacturing plant.

The Historic Preservation Office concurs that the property merits designation under National Register Criterion A and District of Columbia Criterion B (“History”) as the sole Post Office Department shop manufacturing mail bags, locks and boxes for decades. It also meets National Register Criterion C and District of Columbia Criterion D (“Architecture and Urbanism”) for embodying the distinctive characteristics of a type and period of construction and an expression of siting significant to the appearance and development of the District of Columbia especially as an early example of a reinforced-concrete column-and-slab building for Washington, probably the second extant. The federal government was the city’s principal client for such structures, and this was its earliest. Finally, the building represents the unique mix of uses and building types within the historic neighborhood of Eckington, whose development was heavily influenced by the proximity of freight rail and rail-dependent industry.

### **Historic background<sup>2</sup>**

Beginning in 1888, the Post Office Department closed small equipment-repair shops in various parts of the country, and consolidated their functions into a single large shop in Washington. Its work involved the manufacture and repair of almost all mail bag and mail lock equipment used by the Post Office Department. The shops also made cord fasteners, grommets, and other metal attachments for the bags. As the department had its own distribution system headquartered here, concentration of equipment manufacture and repair brought efficiencies by reducing redundancy and increasing scale. Already by 1902 the D.C. facility was no longer capacious enough for the 250 employees, equipment, and storage space needed to house reserve stocks of pouches and sacks and their components. In 1907 a larger building was leased for a decade, and in anticipation of the lease’s expiration, the department set out to construct a purpose-built repair shop.

The new building was to be a “reinforced-concrete and all-glass factory-type building” containing approximately 70,000 square feet of floor space at an estimated cost of \$200,000, including site acquisition costs. The Post Office Department sought an urban site along the rail lines, abandoning the idea of attaching to the rear City Post Office Building because of the added cost of exterior materials suitable for that location.

This Mail Equipment Shops building was completed in April 1918, a state-of-the-art “steel and concrete manufacturing establishment, second to none in the city of Washington, fireproof and sanitary, thoroughly lighted and ventilated.” Indeed, it was one of the earliest reinforced-concrete, column-and-slab buildings in the District, even if other, more industrial cities were several years ahead of us. The building housed employees working in two eight-hour shifts. The shops adopted new methods of production that streamlined production, such as an automatic die

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<sup>2</sup> Almost directly lifted from an excellent nomination.

for making grommet rings. In 1920 a third shift was instituted to handle increased demand for mail bags.

Under the direction of the Fourth Assistant Postmaster General, the shops manufactured, repaired and issued mail bags, mail containers and attachments, mail locks, keys, chains, tools, machinery, and “other equipment for the postal service as may be deemed expedient.” Products were shipped from loading bays in the side of the building, directly onto waiting train cars and trucks. The shops designed innovative equipment to be used in post offices across the country, such as fireproof mail containers for airplanes, automobile bodies, and the revolving pickup table used in tandem with postage-canceling machines. The shops also repaired scales, canceling-machine motors, numbering machines, and similar equipment. By 1923 the bag shop employed 213 people and the tool shop 94 people. During the 1930s it was estimated that upwards of 1,500,000 mail sacks and 800,000 locks were produced annually. In the early years, the Post Office Department’s own production proved less costly than letting private contracts for most products. The efficiency gains of using the new pickup table alone were said to have saved the department \$100,000 by 1921. Government production was also a response to Congressional scrutiny of overcharges and kickbacks for private contracts in previous years.

In 1952 the Mail Equipment Shops remained the only major repair plant in the country, peaking at 517 employees. But labor costs and comparative advantages of private manufacture soon led to the outsourcing of some parts, and the growth and regional centralization of the postal system brought decentralization of repairs into major urban hubs.

Still Washington’s Mail Equipment Shops continued to manufacture locks, postal keys, mail bags, and pouches used by the Post Office Department right up to the year 2002. The building was modernized, reorganized, and even expanded underground for the purpose; most of its conspicuous alterations date to a mid-1950s-to-early-1960s modernization. Equipment updates continued throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. For instance, in 1961 a new bag-cutting, printing, and folding machine was installed, with twice the productive capacity of older machines. Five old presses were replaced by three modern ones. A *Washington Post* article from 1961 noted that the building then also housed the Post Office Department's cartographic section.

### **Integrity**

The property retains all seven aspects of historic integrity (location, setting, design, materials, workmanship, feeling and association) to a great, and sufficient, degree. Its integrity of design and materials, however, have suffered most from two mid-twentieth-century alterations, the construction of an entrance vestibule on the 5<sup>th</sup> Street front, and the replacement of the building’s windows. Still, the most prominent, significant and characteristic feature, the repetitive grid of the concrete column-and-slab structure—three aisles wide and 27 bays long, admitting plenty of natural light and allowing for remarkable flexibility in production layout—remains nearly intact.