

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA  
HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICE



**HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD**  
**APPLICATION FOR HISTORIC LANDMARK OR HISTORIC DISTRICT DESIGNATION**

New Designation     X    

Amendment of a previous designation     —    

Please summarize any amendment(s):

Property name Recorder of Deeds Building

*If any part of the interior is being nominated, it must be specifically identified and described in the narrative statements.*

Address 515 D Street, NW

Square and lot number(s) Square 0489; Lot 0802

Affected Advisory Neighborhood Commission 6C

Date of construction 1940-1943 Date of major alteration(s)                     

Architect(s) Nathan C. Whyeth Architectural style(s) Moderne (stripped classical)

Original use Government/Office Present use Vacant

Property owner District of Columbia

Legal address of property owner 1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20004

NAME OF APPLICANT(S) D.C. Preservation League

*If the applicant is an organization, it must submit evidence that among its purposes is the promotion of historic preservation in the District of Columbia. A copy of its charter, articles of incorporation, or by-laws, setting forth such purpose, will satisfy this requirement.*

Address/Telephone of applicant(s) 401 F Street, NW, Room 324, Washington, DC 20001

Name and title of authorized representative Rebecca Miller, Executive Director

Signature of representative  Date 8/4/2011

Name and telephone of author of application Rebecca Miller (202-783-5144)

Date received \_\_\_\_\_  
H.P.O. staff \_\_\_\_\_

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places  
Registration Form**

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

**1. Name of Property**

historic name Recorder of Deeds Building  
other names \_\_\_\_\_

**2. Location**

street & number 515 D Street NW  not for publication  
city or town Washington, DC  vicinity  
state DC code DC County \_\_\_\_\_ code 001 zip code 20001

**3. State/Federal Agency Certification**

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this  nomination  request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant  nationally  statewide  locally. ( See continuation sheet for additional comments).

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of certifying official/Title Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria. ( See continuation sheet for additional comments).

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of certifying official/Title Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal agency and bureau

**4. National Park Service Certification**

I hereby, certify that this property is:  
 entered in the National Register.  
 See continuation sheet.  
 determined eligible for the National Register.  
 See continuation sheet.  
 Determined not eligible for the National Register.  
 removed from the National Register.  
 other (explain): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of the Keeper Date of Action  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply)

- Private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

Category of Property

(Check only one box)

- building(s)
- District
- Site
- Structure
- Object

Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1		buildings
		sites
		structures
		objects
		Total

Name of related multiple property listing

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

N/A

number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

None

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

Government office/Municipal building

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

Vacant/storage

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions)

Moderne (stripped classical)

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

Foundation Concrete

walls Brick and Limestone

roof Pitch

other

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets)

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Recorder of Deeds Building

Name of Property

Washington, D.C.

County and State

Section 7 Page 1

## Description Summary:

### General Description:

Constructed at 515 D Street NW between 1940 and 1943, the Recorder of Deeds (ROD) Building is a three story structure whose limestone façade wraps the corner onto the 400 block of Sixth Street NW.

The ROD Building, designed by the Office of the Municipal Architect under Nathan C. Wyeth, was one component of a municipal complex planned for the Judiciary Square area. Its “stripped classical” style, popularized by Paul Cret and Bertram Goodhue, echoes that of the District of Columbia Municipal Center one block east. A companion building, the DC Library Annex at 499 Pennsylvania Avenue NW (1940-1943), was demolished in 1982.

The smooth planes of the ROD Building’s facades are cut by a knife-edge vertical corner that aligns with the intersection of D and Sixth Streets. The building’s cornerstone faces D Street at this corner. The perfectly symmetrical facade on each street-face is divided horizontally by a pair of narrow, angled cornices between the first and second stories and topped by a more accentuated roofline cornice. The first floor is illuminated by a row of flush-mounted metal-framed single windows. The vertically-stacked second and third story windows are separated by grey enameled panels, and the entire window ensemble is inset in the facade, creating the impression that the vertical window bands are separated by flat-profiled limestone columns.

The decorations above the twin entrances at either end of the D Street façade repeat the cornices’ incised leaf design, while the legend “Recorder of Deeds” is inscribed below the second story cornice on the D Street façade. Each entrance has a pair of bronze doors with upper and lower glass panes.

The building includes basement vaults to hold original deeds. The first floor includes foyers at each entrance, a lobby that runs in parallel with D Street, and public rooms containing current records. Offices for the Recorder and other managers occupy the second floor, while the third floor housed copyists and other clerical staff. Several public rooms and the recorder’s office have faux fireplaces originally equipped with “electric fires.” The rooftop included a penthouse structure housing an employee cafeteria which is not visible from the street.

The interior is paneled in medium brown walnut. Its most notable feature is its extensive art program, especially the seven murals commissioned by the Treasury Department Section of Fine Art in 1943. These murals are painted on fabric and mounted on the building’s walls in the locations described in Attachment 1. Other significant art works include the 1936 series of portraits of prior recorders, William Edouard Scott’s oil painting titled “Groundbreaking” (1944), and Selma Burke’s sculptural relief “Four Freedoms” (1945).

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Recorder of Deeds Building

Name of Property

Washington, DC

County and State

Section 9 Page 1

## 8. Statement of Significance

### Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

- A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad pattern of our History.
- B** Property associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

### Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply)

Property is:

- A** Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** removed from its original location.
- C** a birthplace or grave.
- D** a cemetery.
- E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F** a commemorative property.
- G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

### Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets)

### Area of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

Politics/Government  
Ethnic Heritage – Black

Architecture and Art

### Period of Significance

1943 – 1945

### Significant Dates

1943, 1944

### Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

### Cultural Affiliation

### Architect/Builder

Nathan C. Wyeth, Office of the Municipal Architect

## 9. Major Bibliographical References

### Bibliography

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Recorder of Deeds Building

Name of Property

Washington, DC

County and State

Section 9 Page 2

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets)

### Previous documentation on files (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey  
# \_\_\_\_\_
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record  
# \_\_\_\_\_

### Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of repository:

\_\_\_\_\_

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Recorder of Deeds Building

Name of Property

Washington, DC

County and State

Section 9 Page 3

## Summary Statement of Significance:

## Resource History and Historic Context:

### Introduction

The District of Columbia Government's Recorder of Deeds (ROD) Building expresses the interplay between political aspirations, social struggle, the search for civic identity, and even the influence of global war on the District of Columbia.

It is significant under Criterion A because of:

- The strong identification and association of the Office of the Recorder of Deeds and ROD building with the struggle of African-Americans for political and social rights. For decades, appointments of prominent African-Americans made the recorder position a national symbol of achievement. The construction of a modern, purpose-built building to house the office was a symbolic expression of inclusion, as well as an acknowledgement of African-American contributions to the nation as it faced a grave external threat. The building represents a victory over the racial discrimination and prejudice that characterized the earlier history of the recorder's office. It is also unique for its era in that the principal force in its construction was an African-American political figure, Recorder William J. Tompkins. Its importance is underscored by the personal participation of President Franklin D. Roosevelt in its 1940 groundbreaking ceremony.
- Its art program, which is integral with its symbolic functions, and is, in fact, a defining element of the building. The portrait series of past recorders incorporated into the building at its completion is considered to be the first such depiction of African-American officials in any federally-sponsored building. The mural program celebrates the contribution of African-Americans to the nation in time of war, as well as to scientific progress, a focus unique among government building art programs of the time. The mural program is unique among Washington federally-sponsored buildings of the time in that it was planned by an African-American, William J. Tompkins.
- Its construction as a purpose-built and specialized component of a municipal complex representing federal acknowledgement of the city's growth and evolution into a metropolis with functions beyond serving as the seat of the federal government.

It is significant under Criterion C because it was:

- Designed under the direction of Municipal Architect Nathan C. Wyeth, a master architect with multiple structures listed on the DC Inventory of Historic Sites and National Register of Historic Places. While Wyeth used the modern/stripped classical style for some earlier designs, the Recorder of Deeds Building

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Recorder of Deeds Building

Name of Property

Washington, DC

County and State

Section   9   Page   4  

occupies a unique niche among his protean and distinguished body of work. It is an office building designed for a special function, as opposed to a general purpose governmental structure such as the Municipal Center, which is programmed to flow its patrons to varied functional areas.

- The final project of the Treasury Department Section of Fine Arts, which oversaw the decoration of hundreds of government buildings. Its mural program is unique among the Section's projects in its focus on African-American contributions, rather than scenes from local history or the functions of the agency which the building housed.

The ROD building includes notable works by recognized American artists, which possess high artistic values. In addition to their merits as individual works, they represent a significant and distinguishable entity as a thematic group. They include the mural program, as well as the sculptural relief "Four Freedoms" by the distinguished African-American artist Selma Burke. This iconic image of Franklin D. Roosevelt may have served as the model for the Roosevelt dime. Its importance is underscored by the personal participation of President Harry S Truman in its 1945 dedication ceremony. While the portraits of past recorders were painted by artists who achieved less recognition, they include a thematically-important pioneering gallery of accomplished African-Americans whose display in a public building was unique in its day.

## The Office of the Recorder of Deeds as a Social and Political Symbol

With the partial exception of the Reconstruction era, a system of racial discrimination and segregation restricted the appointment of African-Americans to federal, state, and municipal positions until after World War II. Beginning with Republican President James Garfield's appointment of Frederick Douglass in 1881, the Recorder of Deeds of the District of Columbia was among a handful of federally-appointed positions open to African-Americans. For decades, this made the Office of the Recorder of Deeds the focal point of political, racial, and social conflict, as well as a national symbol of African-American accomplishment.

Before the Civil War, recording and maintaining land deeds and other legal documents was among the miscellaneous duties assigned to municipal clerks. However, the wartime boom generated a large volume of property subdivisions and sales. In 1863, Congress formalized the District's recordkeeping by creating the position of Recorder, with responsibility for registering, certifying, and filing all deeds, mortgages, conveyances, quit claims, powers of attorney, leases, trusts, incorporations, contracts, covenants, agreements, and similar documents.<sup>1</sup> To resolve lingering questions about the recorder's authority to issue titles to property, in 1869 Congress further formalized the functions of the position, and also instituted a fee system to fully support a recorder's office and staff.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>"Real Estate Changes," *Washington Post*, November 11, 1889, 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Recorder of Deeds Building

Name of Property

Washington, DC

County and State

Section   9   Page   5  

Although many states, counties, and municipalities instituted offices with similar functions, for a century congressional oversight made the District of Columbia recorder’s position unique. Congress made this overseer of services typically provided by county or municipal functionaries a presidential appointee, subject to Senate confirmation in the manner of a cabinet officer or ambassador. Even after the Civil Service reforms of the 1880s, nominations to the recorder position remained a reward for political services rendered elsewhere, and nominees often lacked prior connections to the District residents the office served. In fact, the recorder position was a patronage plum, highly coveted because it was highly lucrative. In addition to fees for certification and other services, the office used the almost medieval method of hand-copying even the longest deeds into record books called “liebers.” Customers were charged by the word, with one-third of the fee going to the copyist and two-thirds to the office. The recorder used the proceeds to pay office expenses and staff salaries, and kept the remainder as personal compensation. After his term, Frederick Douglass suggested that commercial activity increased so much that the Recorder of Deeds had become the most highly-compensated government official after the President.<sup>3</sup>

Douglass, the first African-American recorder, succeeded General George A. Sheridan of Louisiana, who had hired copyist Henrietta Vinton Davis (1860-1941) as the office’s first African-American employee in 1878.<sup>4</sup> Douglass held the position from 1881 through the administration of Chester Alan Arthur, who succeeded to the presidency on Garfield’s assassination, and the first year of Grover Cleveland’s Democratic administration. However, on January 5, 1886, Douglass submitted a letter of resignation to make way for James C. Matthews, an African-American lawyer and active Democrat from Cleveland’s home state of New York. Matthews’ nomination ignited a firestorm of criticism and Douglass continued acting as recorder while a bitter political battle ensued.

Cleveland bluntly informed senators that that he had nominated Matthews because he “desired in this way to tender just recognition and good faith toward our colored fellow citizens.”<sup>5</sup> Some of Matthews’ critics argued that the office should be reserved for a city resident, most particularly white, long-time Deputy Recorder Colonel George F. Schayer. However, hostility extended to Anacostia resident Douglass, who had achieved national stature and recently had been called “the most distinguished representative of the colored race not in this country only, but in the world,” by Republican Senator John Ingalls of Kansas.<sup>6</sup> The news columns of the

<sup>3</sup>Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (Mineola, NY: Courier Dover Press, 1892; reprinted 2003), 387.

<sup>4</sup>“Real Estate Changes,” *Washington Post*, Although Douglass had served as Chief United States Marshall under Hayes, Garfield wished to appoint a boyhood friend and home state political supporter to that position. Douglass agreed to accept the recorder position with what he later felt was the implied but ultimately unkept promise of a future ambassadorship. Garfield’s brief presidency was distinguished by his efforts to appoint prominent African-Americans to national office, including John M. Langston as minister to Haiti and former senator and future Recorder of Deeds Blanche K. Bruce as register to the United States Treasury.

<sup>5</sup> “Matthews Rejection,” *Washington Post*, February 8, 1886, 1.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Recorder of Deeds Building

Name of Property

Washington, DC

County and State

Section   9   Page   6  

*Washington Post* quoted unnamed lawyers' praise of Schayer as "the man who did all the work" while "Fred Douglass did nothing but pocket the fees." These lawyers, the Post continued, "do not like Douglass and ... do not like the appointment of Matthews."<sup>7</sup>

The March 7, 1886 issue of the *Washington Post* fired a double-barreled barrage against Douglass and Matthews. Page 5 reprinted a *Chicago News* article headlined "Fred Douglass Calls Himself a Caucasian", which noted that Douglass was married to a white woman, added twelve years to his true age, and suggested that his mental powers were declining. The Post's editorial on Page 4 protested Cleveland's nomination of a "non-District man" and made the connection with race explicit:

It will not be pretended that Mr. Matthews' race and color is, either in the nature of things or in fact, agreeable to the great majority of citizens, or that they would choose such a man for the semi-personal intercourse of an important position.

The president should have no difficulty finding the right man. He should not be a colored man. Even the president will hardly claim that there is a natural connection between the negro [sic] race and the Recordership of Deeds. As we have already said, he should be a white man and a man of affairs- one in whom our citizens can have confidence and with whom they can associate on pleasant terms.

Cleveland, who was famously iron-willed, did not concede, even to members of his own party. After seven months of struggle, Matthews took control of the Recorder of Deeds Office, and Schayer's resignation was sought and accepted within days.<sup>8</sup>

The Douglass-Matthews affair defined the Recorder position in ways that endured for decades. First, it established an unwritten rule that the position would be reserved for an African-American, regardless of which party was in power. Second, it reinforced the principle that the recorder would be appointed by politicians at the national level, and that the wishes of vote-less local citizens, regardless of their motivations, were not the major consideration. The dispute also first conflated demands that the recorder be a District resident and a white male, and presented the belief that existing bigotry created its own justification for continuing discrimination against African-American nominees.

The appointments of Matthews' successors evoked less controversy, and the Post even belatedly congratulated Matthews as well as his successor former Senator Blanche K. Bruce for efficiency in office.<sup>9</sup> McKinley appointee Henry Plummer Cheatham, a former slave and one-time congressman from North Carolina, modernized the operations of the office and likewise received commendations as an efficient recorder.

<sup>7</sup> "How Deeds Are Kept", *Washington Post*, August 14, 1886, 2.

<sup>8</sup> "In Their New Offices," *Washington Post*, August 11, 1886, 2.

<sup>9</sup> "Recordership of Deeds," *Washington Post*, April 3, 1894, 4.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Recorder of Deeds Building

Name of Property

Washington, DC

County and State

Section   9   Page   7  

However, the Post greeted Theodore Roosevelt’s 1904 nomination of John Dancey as his replacement with an editorial even more virulent than that which had greeted James Mathews fifteen years earlier. It opened by stating, “in our opinion, the negro [sic] is not fit for authority or serious responsibility”, and then disparaged Cheatham in explicitly racist terms:

We are free to admit that Mr. Cheatham is one of the superior specimens of his race. He is perhaps better educated than the average white man. He is certainly endowed with good manners and an attractive presence. But this is not to say that he makes a satisfactory recorder of deeds or that he presents an alluring presence over white employees of both sexes...His office is the arena of all sorts of jealousies and feuds. The negro [sic] has not the facility of command.

It concluded:

To import into a local office of this character a stranger of any color or condition is bad enough. To import a negro [sic] is oppressive and distasteful. But worst of all is the proposition that this or any other office under government belongs by right and must be given to a negro [sic].

In addition to the persistent themes of the incumbent’s race and residency, the Dancey controversy revealed that the composition of the recorder’s office workforce was another source of tension. An 1889 informal census had shown that 14 employees were women and 6 men, while 11 employees were white and 9 African American.<sup>10</sup> Apparently an African-American man supervising white employees, especially if those employees included women, aroused alarm and resentment in some circles.

After the Democrats won control of the White House in 1912, the recorder position again became the subject of a prolonged racial controversy, reflecting the tensions that culminated in the Washington riots of 1919. In 1913-14, the “National Democratic Fair Play Association of Washington”, composed of “prominent local Democrats”, conducted mass meetings lobbying members of congress to confirm only Caucasians for local office.<sup>11</sup> After the recorder position had remained vacant for nearly three years, President Woodrow Wilson nominated John F. Costello, a white District native who was also the city’s National Democratic Committeeman, reportedly because a plank in the Democratic platform called for home rule.<sup>12</sup> Costello, the first

<sup>10</sup>“Real Estate Changes,” Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> “Race Issues Discussed – Speakers at Big Mass Meeting Want White Men in Office; Decry Colored Appointees,” *Washington Post*, July 1, 1913, 3 and “White Man in Office – District Democrats Renew Fight for Recorder of Deeds,” *Washington Post*, January 26, 1914. <sup>12</sup> A number of southern congressmen attended these meetings and support was said to be offered by Senator Vardaman of Mississippi.

<sup>12</sup> “Costello As Recorder”, *Washington Post*, June 9, 1916, 12. Henry Johnson, his predecessor, had resigned on June 30, 1913.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Recorder of Deeds Building

Name of Property

Washington, DC

County and State

Section   9   Page   8  

white Recorder since Douglass' appointment in 1881, served from 1916 until 1922, when Republican Warren G. Harding replaced him with African-American lawyer Arthur Froe.<sup>13</sup>

Well into the twentieth century, the Recorder of Deeds position and these appointment struggles attracted widespread attention in the African-American community nationwide. At one mass meeting during the McKinley era, a resolution was passed stating that "the fact that every ambitious colored man in the country aspired to the position of Recorder of Deeds was to be deplored," as this illuminated the limited public roles open to African-Americans.<sup>14</sup> The selection of new recorders was covered in detail by such national African-American newspapers as the Chicago Defender.

## William J. Tompkins: Advocate

From its earliest days, the recorder's office occupied rooms in the old City Hall at Judiciary Square and nearby rented space. During Douglass' tenure, the recorder's office had moved from its original location on the third floor of City Hall's southeast wing to the first floor of its new northeast wing. During Matthews' administration, it relocated to "first class accommodations" in the northwest section of the building. In 1908 most city offices moved uptown to the new District Building and Old City Hall became the District Courthouse. However, the recorder's stayed at Judiciary Square to remain close to the court.

In 1878, Recorder Simon Wolf first called attention to the lack of fireproof storage for irreplaceable land records.<sup>15</sup> Even during the Douglass-Matthews controversy of 1886, the *Washington Post* had noted that the Office of the Recorder "needs a fireproof room" to store deeds.<sup>16</sup> A fire threatened the copying room in 1901, and recorders continued to lobby for a consolidated, secure space.<sup>17</sup> However, until the New Deal, the District Commissioners and Congress disregarded these requests.

Dr. William J. Tompkins, recorder from 1934 to 1944, is largely responsible for translating pleas for a secure building with fireproof vaults into concrete, steel, and limestone. A hospital superintendent from Kansas City, Missouri, Dr. Tompkins was a supporter of county official Harry S Truman, and "stumped the state" for his 1934 senatorial campaign.<sup>18</sup> While serving as recorder, Tompkins, one of the six members of the African-American committee of the Democratic National Committee in 1936, was a nationally-prominent symbol of African-American achievement and the role of African-Americans within the New Deal. He often appeared at public functions and participated in ceremonies. A portrait of him at his desk was published in *Life Magazine* on

<sup>13</sup> "Arthur G. Froe, Colored Lawyer, Takes Oath of Office," *Washington Post*, March 2, 1922, 4.

<sup>14</sup> "Colored Citizens Protest," *Washington Post*, March 26, 1897, 3.

<sup>15</sup> "The Interests of Citizens," *Washington Post*, January 28, 1878, 2.

<sup>16</sup> "How Deeds Are Kept," *Washington Post*, August 14, 1886, 2.

<sup>17</sup> "Valuable Records in Danger," *Washington Post*, February 14, 1891, 5 and "To Preserve Deed Records," *Washington Post*, October 10, 1903, 9.

<sup>18</sup> Harry S Truman Presidential Library. "Oral History Interview with James P. Aylward. June 12-27, 1968. p. 182-183.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Recorder of Deeds Building

Name of Property

Washington, DC

County and State

Section 9 Page 9

January 1, 1940 and his face is painted into the mural of Marian Anderson's 1030 Lincoln Memorial concert at the Department of the Interior building.

Dr. Tompkins was a determined advocate for his office and an adroit handler of the press. During the mid-1930s, he constantly reminded reporters and the federally-appointed District commissioners that the revenues and workload of the recorder's office were growing despite the depression. Frequently, he advised the public that the operational efficiencies of a purpose-built building would repay construction costs as well as save rent.<sup>19</sup>

In 1939, Dr. Tompkins created a press flurry by suggesting that property owners receive the original deeds to their lots. These documents, he said, often had signatures valuable as autographs, and were expensive to guard round-the-clock, as they were overflowing the office's seven large storage rooms.<sup>20</sup> With Senator Truman's support, the resistance of the District commissioners was overcome. On July 13, 1940 a bill allowing the District to receive a Public Works Administration loan to fund a recorder's building was signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt.<sup>21</sup>

## Nathan C. Wyeth: Designer

Other than Dr. Tompkins, Municipal Architect Nathan C. Wyeth was perhaps the most important figure in shaping the Recorder of Deeds (ROD) building. Nathan Corwith Wyeth was born April 20, 1870 in Chicago. His father, Charles J. Wyeth, was a prosperous member of the Chicago Board of Trade and a principal in the firm of Wyeth and Vandervoort, which sold malt to the brewing industry. Late in life, Nathan Wyeth would repeat a story about being carried from the path of the Chicago fire as a babe in arms.<sup>22</sup> Charles Wyeth died in 1873, and, in 1881, Wyeth's mother married General Orlando Bolivar Willcox, a Detroit attorney turned soldier who was awarded the Medal of Honor for leading multiple charges at the Battle of Bull Run.<sup>23</sup> After spending the remainder of the war in Confederate prison camps, General Willcox had been assigned to the southwestern territories, where he spent much of the 1870s and 1880s battling Apache Indians. It is not known whether his step-children accompanied him to his post or whether they were placed in boarding school. After retiring from active duty in 1887, General Willcox became Director of the United States Soldiers Home and the Willcox-Wyeth family settled at 2022 R Street NW, near Dupont Circle.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>19</sup>“Realty Boom Here Equals Days of War,” *Washington Post*, February 1, 1935, 1.

<sup>20</sup>“1,500,000 Original Land Deeds Crowd Recorder's Office Vaults,” *Washington Post*, March 7, 1939, 28.

<sup>21</sup>“President Signs Bill for New Recorder's Office,” *Washington Post*, July 13, 1940, 2.

<sup>22</sup> National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form. —Sixteenth Street Historic District (Boundary Expansion).2006. Washington, DC: National Park Service

<sup>23</sup>“Medals for Two Brave Men”, *Washington Post*, February 27, 1895, 3. General Willcox's medal was awarded many years after the Civil War.

<sup>24</sup>“Gen. O.B. Willcox Buried”, *Washington Post*, May 15, 1907, 11.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Recorder of Deeds Building

Name of Property

Washington, DC

County and State

Section 9 Page 10

Nathan Wyeth's architectural career could well have been derailed before it began. Charles Wyeth's will had provided his widow and two sons with an income based upon a principal of \$100,000 (the equivalent of several million dollars today), placed in trust with the friend for whom Nathan had been named. However, in 1888 the sudden failure of N. Corwith and Company sent ripples through the major New York City banks. It was later revealed Nathan Corwith, a merchant, banker, and speculator referred to as the "Lead King", had comingled the Wyeth brothers' trust with funds for his failed business. Litigation outlived Corwith, dragging on into the mid-1890s, and eventually reached the Illinois Supreme Court.<sup>25</sup> Although it is unclear that the brothers recovered any assets, the family was still able to fund their educations.

Nathan Wyeth spent part of 1888 painting watercolors in Switzerland, returning to the United States to attend the Michigan Military Academy in 1888-1889. Afterwards, he studied at the School of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, receiving an \$80 prize for best work in the architecture class in April 1890.<sup>26</sup> However, when he applied for a passport in June 1890, he provided Washington, DC, rather than New York, as his place of residence.

Nothing is known of Nathan Wyeth's subsequent whereabouts until 1899, when he graduated from the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris after studying under Jean Louis Pascal (1837-1920). Accounts of the early period of Wyeth's career are as contradictory as those of his student years are vague. However, his 1946 American Institute of Architects questionnaire reports that, from 1899 to 1900, he was a designer for the noted New York firm of Carrere & Hastings, whose principals were fellow graduates of the Ecole...<sup>27</sup> This may have been in New York, although Carrere & Hastings had been involved in the capital's architectural affairs from the mid-1890s, when John M. Carrere mounted an unsuccessful campaign to be named Supervisory Architect of the Treasury. In 1899, the firm had begun constructing the Townsend House (later the Cosmos Club) on Massachusetts Avenue, just blocks from Willcox-Wyeth house.

In 1900, Wyeth became a designer for the Office of the Supervisory Architect of the Treasury, and on June 4, 1900, a census enumerator found him boarding with the family of John Pairo at 2127 Florida Avenue NW, again a short stroll from his family's home.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps these arrangements were intended to be temporary, as on December 23, 1900, the *Washington Post* reported that "Mr. Nathan Wyeth, who has spent the last five years

<sup>25</sup> "Street v. French," *The Northeastern Reporter, Volume 35* (Chicago: West Publishing Company, 1894) 816. Pages 814-820 describe the case in detail.

<sup>26</sup> "Prizes for Art Students," *New York Times*, May 1, 1890, 8.

<sup>27</sup> The questionnaire, viewed online at <http://communities.aia.org/sites/hdoaa/wiki/Wiki%20Pages/ahd1049832.aspx> on April 12, 2011. It is apparently the source for the Wyeth career summary in Antoinette J. Lee. *Architects to the Nation: The Rise and Decline of the Supervising Architect's Office*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 212.

<sup>28</sup> Twelfth Census of the United States. Washington, DC. Enumeration 145, Sheet 4A.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Recorder of Deeds Building

Name of Property

Washington, DC

County and State

Section 9 Page 11

studying architecture in Paris, will be spending the winter with his mother at 2022 R Street NW.”<sup>29</sup> However, Wyeth remained in the capital for the rest of his life.

In 1904, Wyeth transferred to the Office of the Architect of the Capitol.<sup>30</sup> In April of that year, Carrere & Hastings, who had refurbished and rebuilt sections of the Capitol in 1901, were retained to design the original House and Senate Office buildings, with plans to be drawn within the Office of the Architect of the Capitol.<sup>31</sup> Wyeth likely worked with former colleagues on this project, which his entry in Wyatt’s American Architect cites as his first “principal work.”<sup>32</sup>

In 1901, Wyeth’s work had attracted its first attention in Washington, when a review of the Washington Architecture Club Show at the Corcoran Gallery commented on the “beautifully rendered designs characteristic of the Friend School” offered by N.C. Wyeth.<sup>33</sup> At the same time, he was launching himself into the whirl of the capital’s high society. Possibly through the prestige of General Willcox, his connections far exceeded those of most beginning architects. In December, 1902, he was a guest at the White House debut of Alice Roosevelt, which he followed with attendance at a series of balls and receptions.<sup>34</sup> Although Wyeth was in his early thirties and probably past his athletic prime, he was an enthusiastic member of the Washington Fencing Club and played competitive tennis at the club level.

In early 1904, Wyeth formed a partnership with fellow Ecole graduate William Penn Cresson (1873-1932), later a diplomat, distinguished biographer of James Monroe, and husband of Daniel Chester French’s daughter. Wyeth & Cresson, whose offices were at 1517 H Street NW, received its first building permit in March 1904, and executed seven other commissions during its three years of activity. Most of these were fashionable residences with a minimum construction cost of \$25,000, in an era when Harry Wardman built row houses for about \$2,000 each.<sup>35</sup> Wyeth also continued to work on the congressional office buildings while a member of the firm.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>29</sup> “Social and Personal,” *Washington Post*, December 23, 1900, 18.

<sup>30</sup> 1946 Wyeth AIA Questionnaire, viewed online at <http://communities.aia.org/sites/hdoaa/wiki/Wiki%20Pages/ahd1049832.aspx> on April 12, 2011. Wyeth’s entry in Wyatt’s American Architects cites government employment only prior to 1900. See George S. Koyl. *Wyatt’s American Architects* (R.S. Bowker, 1962), 784, accessed at <http://www.archive.org/details/americanarchitec001309mbp>, May 1, 2011

<sup>31</sup> “Architect of Office Building,” *Washington Post*, April 12, 1904, 4.

<sup>32</sup> Koyl. 784.

<sup>33</sup> “Art Topics,” *Washington Post*, April 7, 1901, E9.

<sup>34</sup> “Miss Alice Roosevelt Introduced to Society,” *Washington Post*, January 4, 1902. 1.

<sup>35</sup> All permit information from DC Historic Preservation Office. “DC Building Permit Database” on Compact Disc.(2009). Also see “Design Handsome Houses,” *Washington Post*, October 6, 1907, R7. One 1905-06 Wyeth & Cresson commission became a notorious address in Washington political history. 1509 H Street NW, in the same block as the Wyeth & Cresson office, was built for John R. McLean, banker, streetcar magnate, and political kingmaker, publisher of

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Recorder of Deeds Building

Name of Property

Washington, DC

County and State

Section 9 Page 12

Beginning independent practice in 1907, Wyeth continued to design Beaux Arts mansions, including the Gibson Fahnestock and other houses in the 2300 and 2400 blocks of Massachusetts Avenue, the Pullman Mansion and assorted residences in the 16<sup>th</sup> Street corridor, and houses in the 2100 and 2200 blocks of R Street NW.<sup>37</sup> In 1908-1909, Wyeth expanded his practice beyond society commissions and executed two major federal projects. As part of a partial reconstruction of the Tidal Basin, Wyeth designed the graceful, classically-accented Tidal Reservoir Inlet Bridge (1908-09) with Army Corps of Engineers Colonel Spencer Cosby.<sup>38</sup> The second project was the most noted commission of Wyeth's early career. Almost immediately after his inauguration in March 1909, President William Howard Taft ordered a competition to enlarge and make permanent the existing White House west wing offices.<sup>39</sup> Wyeth's winning design included a curved windowed wall and oval presidential office, patterned after the Blue Room. Construction of this original Oval Office began while the Taft family was summering at Malden, Massachusetts, and was completed in the fall of 1909. The finished office attracted considerable mention in the press.<sup>40</sup>

Besides his busy practice, Wyeth found time to act as patron to the Architectural Club of Washington, critiquing members' solutions to problems posed by the Beaux Arts Society of New York.<sup>41</sup> During the summer of 1911, he married the daughter of a wealthy Cincinnati manufacturer of tin plate who had spent several seasons in Washington with an aunt who was an intimate friend of Mrs. William Howard Taft.<sup>42</sup> After his marriage, Wyeth moved in Washington's most elite social and diplomatic circles.

After 1910, Wyeth designed increasingly more prominent buildings. He directed extensive remodeling of the British Embassy<sup>43</sup>, and remodeled Mrs. George Pullman's house at 1125 Sixteenth Street into a chancery for the Russian ambassador.<sup>44</sup> In 1913, Wyeth designed the Columbia Hospital for Women in the Italian Renaissance style<sup>45</sup> and, in 1915, the city's nine story Emergency Hospital, which stood within two blocks of the White

---

the Cincinnati Enquirer and owner of the Washington Post. After passing into the hands of McLean's son Ned, it became a sort of clubhouse for the "Ohio Gang" that surrounded President Warren G. Harding and was nicknamed "The Love Nest" for the notorious bacchanals that Harding's cronies staged there. .

<sup>36</sup> Koyl. 784 states that Wyeth & Cresson worked on the House and Senate Office Buildings 1906-08.

<sup>37</sup> "New Residence Planned," *Washington Post*, May 2, 1909, CA7.

<sup>38</sup> "Nathan Wyeth Will Become City Architect," *Washington Post*, January 12, 1934, 15.

<sup>39</sup> In 1902, President Theodore Roosevelt had commissioned the firm of McKim, Mead, and White to add west wing offices to the White House. McKim envisioned this space to be temporary, as he had endorsed Daniel Burnham's proposal for a permanent federal office campus in Lafayette Square centered on new presidential offices.

<sup>40</sup> "More Room for President," *Washington Post*, May 20, 1909, 3.

<sup>41</sup> "Prizes for Atelier Work," *Washington Post*, September 28, 1908. 6.

<sup>42</sup> "Miss Lawson Will Wed Mr. Wyeth," *Washington Post*, September 9, 1911, 7.

<sup>43</sup> "Improve British Embassy," *Washington Post*, July 13, 1910. 12.

<sup>44</sup> "New Chancery Ready November 1," *Washington Post*, September 13, 1914, R3.

<sup>45</sup> "Hospital Fund Ready," *Washington Post*, December 7, 1913, R3.



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Recorder of Deeds Building

Name of Property

Washington, DC

County and State

Section 9 Page 13

House.<sup>46</sup> In 1916, Wyeth began plans for his most impressive commission to date, the Key Bridge.<sup>47</sup> Connecting the high bluffs of Georgetown to Roslyn, Virginia, the new bridge's high, repeating arches replaced the early nineteenth century Aqueduct Bridge as the major Potomac River crossing. Wyeth served as a major in the Army Sanitary Corps during World War I, and spent several years in Switzerland after the war, possibly recovering from exhaustion from overwork.<sup>48</sup>

Returning to Washington in 1924, Wyeth rebuilt his practice, designing elite residences and embassy buildings, but also seeking other types of commissions. In 1925, he was among a dozen architects named to assist Municipal Architect Albert Harris with a backlog of school design projects, and he co-founded a firm named Allied Architects to undertake other public commissions.<sup>49</sup> In 1926, he began a successful architectural partnership with Francis P. Sullivan. In 1929, he designed a complex of Georgian-themed houses which adjoined Sir Edwin Lutyens' new British Embassy,<sup>50</sup> one of which became the home of Paul Mellon.

In the spring of 1929, Allied Architects was selected to design the new Longworth House Office Building, with Wyeth as principal partner.<sup>51</sup> In late 1929, Allied Architects' unsolicited proposal for a municipal complex was accepted by the District Government, with Wyeth as chief designer.<sup>52</sup> At the same time, Wyeth and Sullivan were serving as consulting architects for a new wing for the Russell Senate Office Building, which was completed in 1933.<sup>53</sup>

Wyeth might have retired after these commissions, but he had lost a considerable portion of his wealth in the stock market crash, and continued to practice with a focus on public buildings.<sup>54</sup> In 1933, he became an employee of the Office of the Municipal Architect, and, in 1934, aged 64, assumed its direction following the death of incumbent Albert Harris.<sup>55</sup> He held this position until 1946, and then enjoyed a long retirement until his death at age 93 in 1963.

<sup>46</sup>"Rush New Hospital," *Washington Post*, November 23, 1913, R3. Also "Where the Sick and Injured Are Soon To Find Help," *Washington Post*, November 13, 1913, 14.

<sup>47</sup>Historic American Buildings Survey. "Gibson Fahnestock House, DC-259" (1978) 5.

<sup>48</sup>"Busy Nathan C. Wyeth Designs the Capital's Buildings," *Washington Post*, January 7, 1940. E1

<sup>49</sup>"12 Named to Aid Harris," *Washington Post*, March 18, 1925, 2.

<sup>50</sup>"Small Group Plans Homes," *Washington Post*, October 8, 1929, 7.

<sup>51</sup>"New House Office Plans Completed," *Washington Post*, April 21, 1929. 9.

<sup>52</sup>"Allied Architects to Aid Center Plan," *Washington Post*, July 24, 1929. 5. See also "Individual Architects Employed on Center Plan," *Washington Post*, October 31, 1929. 10.

<sup>53</sup>"Russell Senate Office Building," Architect of the Capitol Website at <http://www.aoc.gov/cc/cobs/rsob.cfm>, accessed May 20, 2011.

<sup>54</sup>National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form. —Sixteenth Street Historic District (Boundary Expansion)

<sup>55</sup>"Nathan Wyeth Will Become City Architect," *Washington Post*, January 12, 1934, 15.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Recorder of Deeds Building

Name of Property

Washington, DC

County and State

Section 9 Page 14

Wyeth is not an obscure architect. His name appears frequently in any comprehensive account of Washington’s public architecture or historically-designated neighborhoods with fashionable houses. However, there is no comprehensive study of his work and his enormous contributions to the cityscape have never received the acknowledgement that they deserve.

## Architecture as an Expression of Identity

Plagued by the inefficiencies inherent in having offices scattered throughout the city, the United States Government centralized its functions at the Federal Triangle, whose buildings were constructed between 1926 and 1937. The advantages of this concept were plainly apparent to the District Government, whose functions were split between Judiciary Square and the District Building.<sup>56</sup> In 1930, newspapers published a Wyeth-Harris refinement of the Allied Architect plan for a neoclassical-style DC Government complex in the Judiciary Square area. This concept gained traction under the New Deal public works programs, although grim depression-era public finances pushed the acquisition of land and approval of models into the late 1930s.<sup>57</sup>

The centerpiece buildings in the Wyeth-Harris plan were the neoclassical District Courthouse (constructed as the original City Hall in 1820) and the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia (1910). The first buildings constructed under the plan were the Wyeth-designed Police Court (1936-37), and Municipal and Juvenile Courthouses (1940), which echo the older courthouses’ neoclassical lines in mildly simplified form.

In 1939, Wyeth wrote an article for *Pencil Points* describing the updated municipal center plan, which included erecting an administrative complex between the south side of Judiciary Square and the National Mall.<sup>58</sup> Although Wyeth’s article did not mention an ROD Building, his rendering of the plan showed a large structure on its eventual site.

Each District of Columbia municipal architect favored a particular style, which was usually closely related to prevailing middle -of-the-road architecture taste. This common denominator mitigated conflict by ensuring that schools, fire stations, and other municipal buildings, which were often constructed in developing areas, were stylistically compatible with current fashion. Wyeth at first retained Harris’ heavily-favored and highly-conservative Colonial Revival and Georgian styles, in which he was at least equally fluent. During Wyeth’s early tenure, Coolidge High School (1937) was constructed in the Georgian style with a tall cupola<sup>59</sup>, and the new courthouses on Judiciary Square, in Wyeth’s words, “preserved the spirit” of the neighboring nineteenth

<sup>56</sup> Nathan C. Wyeth. “Washington Municipal Center”, *Pencil Points*, September 1939, 578. Here Wyeth states that these discussions began in 1927.

<sup>57</sup>“Approval Given to Two Plans for City Center,” *Washington Post*, February 9, 1935, 5. See also “Ninth Street Survey Gets DC Approval,” *Washington Post*, May 22, 1937, 15.

<sup>58</sup> Wyeth. “Washington Municipal Center”, 578.

<sup>59</sup>“District to Build Coolidge School Despite Protests,” *Washington Post*, December 23, 1937, 13.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Recorder of Deeds Building

Name of Property

Washington, DC

County and State

Section   9   Page  15 

century courthouse.<sup>60</sup> Branch libraries in the Georgetown (1935) and Petworth (1939) areas of Northwest Washington were respectively in the “Georgian”<sup>61</sup> and “colonial” styles as well.<sup>62</sup>

However, Wyeth’s *Pencil Point* drawings suggested that the District’s administrative buildings would have a new look. Indeed, both the District of Columbia Municipal Center and National Guard Armory (1938 to 1941) feature a stripped classical/moderne style that differs radically from that of the buildings sketched in the Harris era plan.<sup>63</sup>

The “stripped classical” style utilizes abstractions of such classical features as columns and cornices, as well as an emphasis on symmetry and repeating elements. It is often characterized by flat rectangular piers, vertical bands of windows, columns without bases or capitals, unobtrusive cornices and moldings, and smooth surface planes of marble, limestone, or concrete. Decorative accents may be provided by varying color or contrasting material textures, but exterior ornament is almost totally absent. When present, it may appear as artistic works like sculpture appended to the building or a surface pattern applied to one element for dramatic effect. “Stripped classicism” overlaps with the “moderne” style. However, many moderne buildings feature curved façade elements, while stripped classical buildings emphasize right angles and square corners.

Washington’s earliest stripped classical masterpieces are Bertram Goodhue’s National Academy of Sciences Headquarters (1917-23) and Paul Cret’s Folger Shakespeare Library (1928-33). Cret’s Federal Reserve Bank Headquarters, erected between 1935 and 1937 within a few blocks of Goodhue’s building, was Washington’s first magnificent stripped classical public building. It provides a startling contrast to the neoclassical Federal Triangle complex of 1926-1937.

Cret, whose attendance at the Ecole overlapped with Wyeth’s, and who, like Wyeth, studied in the atelier of Jean Louis Pascal, had jettisoned the Beaux Arts style for stripped classicism in the 1920s. Wyeth never described the reasons behind his own belated switch.<sup>64</sup> However, a likely source was the New Deal’s anointment of stripped classicism as its preferred style for public buildings. This style embodied the stability and enduring values symbolized by classical elements, as well as the modernity and fresh outlook expressed in the phrase “New Deal”. It symbolically broke a connection to the Hoover era and the failures of past public policy. Wyeth’s employment of this style also visually differentiated the new Municipal Center from such neo-

<sup>60</sup>“New District Court Building Is Nearly Ready,” *Washington Post*, January 9, 1938, R8.

<sup>61</sup>“Brick Georgian Edifice to Cost \$150,000, To Open in Fall,” *Washington Post*, August 26, 1934. 6.

<sup>62</sup>“Petworth Library to Open,” *Washington Post*, January 27, 1939. 12.

<sup>63</sup>“Civic Center Plans Begun,” *Washington Post*, January 5, 1930, 3.

<sup>64</sup> Although some observers might point to the soaring unadorned concrete arches of the Key Bridge as an early example of the stripped classical aesthetic, Wyeth’s original design was more elaborate and highly decorated. During the World War I era, cost considerations led to reducing the project to one deck from two and the simplification of its ornamental details. Wyeth was reportedly dismayed by these modifications. Later widening of the roadbed and bridge deck discarded more of his remaining detail.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Recorder of Deeds Building

Name of Property

Washington, DC

County and State

Section   9   Page  16 

classical federal neighbors as the Apex Building of the Federal Triangle and John Russell Pope’s National Gallery. In at least a local sense, the new municipal style seemingly expressed the District of Columbia’s ambition to maintain a new and more independent identity in relation to the federal government.

## Constructing the ROD Building

The public relations ministrations of Doctor Tompkins gave the ROD building project a high-profile launch. On September 26, 1940, just two months after the signing of the funding bill, Dr. Tompkins, clad in formal attire, served as master of ceremonies at a groundbreaking attended by Franklin D. Roosevelt. Roosevelt pushed a button to start the excavation, and in broadcast remarks commended Dr. Tompkins’ “efficiency” in restoring prompt service while turning an operating loss into a profit that benefitted taxpayers. Attendees, including more than 1,000 African-Americans, heard speeches whose tone was martial, inclusive, and incongruous. Keynote speaker Jack Nichols (D-OK) hailed the patriotism of African-Americans and found bizarre optimism in the news that “the army recruiting offices state that the colored quotas are full and that colored youths eager to serve their country are being turned away every day.” The remarks of J. Finley Wilson, Exulted Ruler of the IPBOCE, were forthright. “If Hitler should attempt anything against this country, he may get to the District line, but that’s where he’ll stop.”<sup>65</sup>

However, despite the strong send-off, construction was almost immediately halted by a union dispute which had festered even before Roosevelt spoke. The excavation contractor ran a CIO shop, while the subcontractor providing the steam shovel used AFL operators. Refusing to allow its members to work with CIO members, the AFL forced the subcontractor to remove the steam shovel as soon as it had dug its symbolic three shovels of earth. An attempt to restart work with a non-union steam shovel contractor led to both unions setting up picket lines. The dispute took two weeks to resolve, while work stopped at several other municipal construction sites.<sup>66</sup>

On April 25, 1941, about eight months after the groundbreaking, Dr. Tompkins described the design created by the Office of the Municipal Architect. The new building would have basement vaults to hold more than 1,500,000 original deeds, some of which had survived the British burning of Washington in 1814. Like Cret’s Folger Library, the ROD building’s interior would not follow its stripped classical exterior theme. Rather, its interior was paneled rather plainly and several public rooms and the recorder’s office had faux fireplaces with “electric fires.”<sup>67</sup>

Dr. Tompkins predicted that the ROD building would be ready by early 1942, but, even before Pearl Harbor, materials were in short supply. On October 14, 1941, it was reported that construction had halted for lack of

<sup>65</sup>“Roosevelt to Talk,” *Washington Post*, September 25, 1940,16 and “Ground Broken for Hall of Records,” *Washington Post*, September 27, 1940, 1.

<sup>66</sup>“Tie-up of Channel Project Threatened,” *Washington Post*, October 5, 1940, 1.

<sup>67</sup>“Contract Let,” *Washington Post*, April 25, 1941, 21.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Recorder of Deeds Building

Name of Property

Washington, DC

County and State

Section 9 Page 17

steel window frames.<sup>68</sup> However, the Central Library under construction at 499 Pennsylvania Avenue NW was even less fortunate. Although ground had been broken at substantially the same time, the library’s site remained an empty pit because structural steel was unavailable. War had been raging for over a year when the ROD building quietly opened in 1943.<sup>69</sup>

## Symbolism and the Definition of the ROD Building through Art

The history of the Office of the Recorder demonstrates its importance as a symbol of African-American achievement and the struggle against racism during a period of intense oppression. Constructing the ROD building within the proposed Municipal Center district in the same architectural style as the Municipal Center was a powerful statement of inclusion, as well as a symbolic validation of the importance of African-Americans’ contributions to the city and nation at a time of national peril. However, a criticism of the stripped classical style is that its spare and austere detailing minimizes a building’s individuality. This implication that buildings in this style are “wearing a uniform” of simplified elements seems a particularly apt criticism of a building with a functions and antecedents as unique and important as the ROD’s. However, like many other stripped classical public buildings, the ROD building individualized itself through an internal program of fine art.

The original component of the ROD Building’s art program predated the building. In 1936, Dr. Tompkins arranged for Velma D. Buckner, “a young colored artist and graduate of the Dunbar High School, Howard, and Columbia Universities”, Alan Page Flavelle, and Henry Wadsworth Moore to be hired by the Works Progress Administration to paint portraits of his ten African-American predecessors, as well as Grant Administration recorder Simon Wolf and the still-living John Costello to represent the white recorders. While Buckner (1905-1992) left no other discernable artistic footprints, Moore (1879-1968) was long a member of the Washington Landscape Painters Club, and executed several WPA commissions, including the portrait of Benjamin Banneker that hangs in Banneker High School.<sup>70</sup> Allan Page Flavelle (1907-1995), whose first name was reported as “Alma” by the *Washington Post*, was a Syracuse University graduate who executed other WPA commissions in Washington as well as his native Oregon.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>68</sup>“DC Heads Will Act to Free Projects,” *Washington Post*, October 14, 1941, 3.

<sup>69</sup> After Pearl Harbor, the library was allocated a low construction priority rating, and building of one of its six planned modules began only after the District agreed to lend it to the war emergency board for the duration. Ultimately, this delay sealed this handsome building’s fate. After the war, priorities changed and construction did not resume. Known as the “Library Annex”, the building was retrofitted as awkward office space for the city Library Board. In 1971, the Mies van Rohe-designed building now known as the Martin Luther King Library opened in midtown, and the Library Annex became surplus space. It was demolished in 1982 to make way for the new Canadian Embassy.

<sup>70</sup>Viewed online at <http://www.pages.drexel.edu/~lvj23/eport/iplproject.pdf>, accessed May 11, 2011.

<sup>71</sup> In 1937, Flavelle was briefly the focus of a controversy when an administrator ordered that his unfinished WPA mural of the “History of Electricity” on the ceiling of the Glen Dale Hospital heliotherapy room be painted over, eliciting protests from the American Artists’ Union’s DC Chapter.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section   9   Page  18 

Recorder of Deeds Building

Name of Property

Washington, DC

County and State

The portraits were presented at a ceremony in the Recorder’s Office space at 412 D Street NW, at which the life of each recorder was recalled by a prominent citizen, including Mary Church Terrell, a close friend of Frederick Douglass, and Maurice Rosenberg, who had known Simon Wolf. Dr. Tompkins let it be known that he looked forward to the day that the office would have its own building, with space to display portraits of “all the recorders.”<sup>72</sup> The ensemble was said to be only collection of portraits of African-Americans in any federally-controlled office space, a situation which continued after the portraits was moved to the ROD Building.

Although the ROD Building was a municipal building, the District of Columbia’s peculiar sovereignty status required that the federal government approve its construction, and that the Treasury Department Section of Fine Art play a major role in its art program. The most noteworthy component of this art program is often erroneously called “WPA murals.” Although they are stylistically similar to much Works Progress Administration-created art, the murals are actually the final project commissioned by the Treasury Department Section of Fine Art.

While the New Deal is justly famed for its overall commitment to public art, the success of the Treasury Section rests with the vision of three individuals. Program Director Edward Bruce underwent a midlife transition from lawyer and businessman to painter before organizing the Public Works Art Program (PWAP) in 1933.<sup>73</sup> Assistant Director Edward B. Rowan was a painter of regional note and founder of the innovative Little Gallery in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.<sup>74</sup> Bruce’s other immediate subordinate was Forbes Watson, a New York City art critic and journalist.<sup>75</sup> The PWAP was the victim of budget cuts after only six months of operation, but Bruce and his team then moved to the Treasury Department, whose Office of the Supervisory Architect, where Nathan Wyeth had begun his career, had charge of civilian public buildings. There Bruce, Forbes, and Watson established the Treasury Section program, which stressed the creation of high quality public art, rather than providing relief for unemployed artists, the focus of the WPA arts programs.<sup>76</sup>

The Treasury Section awarded most of its commissions through “blind” competitions, where a jury judged unsigned entries. It financed its purchases by earmarking a fractional share of each building’s construction budget. Although the Section controlled the decoration of some departmental headquarters in Washington, many of its commissions were for post offices in small and mid-size towns. When it appeared that no local artist

<sup>72</sup> “City Honors Former Deed Office Heads,” *Washington Post*, December 16, 1936, X19. Also, “Deed Recorder Portrait Series Unveiled,” *Washington Post*, December 13, 1936, M9.

<sup>73</sup> Belisario Contreras. *Tradition and Innovation in New Deal Art*. (Lewisburg, Pa: Bucknell University Press, 1983), 31-37.

<sup>74</sup> Sue Bridewell Beckham. *Depression Post Office Murals and Southern Culture*(Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 12-13. Also, Marlene Park and Gerald Markowitz. *Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal*(Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 7.

<sup>75</sup> Richard McKinzie. *The New Deal for Artists*(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 12.

<sup>76</sup> Jonathan Harris. *Federal Art and National Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 24.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Recorder of Deeds Building

Name of Property

Washington, DC

County and State

Section 9 Page 19

could produce work of the required quality, outside artists whose work had impressed the Section's leadership were commissioned. Artists were required to work closely with local oversight committees to create works featuring themes that were important to the community.<sup>77</sup> Bruce preferred realistic art, and Treasury Section artists generally eschewed abstraction and other "advanced styles" that might challenge public acceptance. However, Section artists often had to defuse resistance from local officials and citizens who believed that public art was a waste of taxpayers' money or were simply opposed to New Deal programs on principle.<sup>78</sup> Occasionally, local citizens complained about perceived left-wing themes in murals. Most such controversies were resolved through dialogue between the artist and the Section, although a few disputes received national publicity<sup>79</sup>

After the start of World War II, perception grew that public art was not essential to the war effort. While Bruce tried to retool the Treasury Section to produce posters to boost morale and sell war bonds, the Section had its budget cut and lost much of its autonomy. Bruce, whose health was poor, died from a stroke on January 27, 1943, while the ROD Building mural competition was in progress.<sup>80</sup> Although the Treasury Section officially expired with its funding on June 30, 1943, Edward Rowan oversaw the ROD building project through the installation of the finished murals in January 1944.

## Creating the ROD Building Murals

The Treasury Section's December 1, 1942 announcement of the ROD Building mural competition was a term paper-like, ten page document that required artists to submit their entries unsigned for anonymous judging.<sup>81</sup> Mural subjects had been "carefully worked out by the Recorder... following intensive research." Dr. Tompkins had determined that "in view of the history of the office of the Recorder... the united theme... [will] reflect a phase of the contribution of the Negro to the American nation." The announcement prescribed each of the seven mural's placement, size, subject, and setting in detail, citing historical reference works for its content. For example, "Benjamin Banneker Surveys the District of Columbia" was to "show the presentation by Banneker and Mayor Ellicott, of the plans of the District of Columbia to the President, [and] Mr. Thomas Jefferson" in the presence of Benjamin Franklin and Alexander Hamilton.

<sup>77</sup>Mckinzie. 37-38.

<sup>78</sup>Conteras.p. 102.

<sup>79</sup>Karal Ann Marling.*Wall-to-Wall America*(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 44-48, presents an account of the Coit Tower controversy and other conflicts.

<sup>80</sup>*Ibid.* p. 229.

<sup>81</sup>An original copy of the competition announcement is contained in the Martyl Schweig Langsdorf Papers, Box 1 at the Smithsonian Institution Archive of American Art in Washington, DC. The competition was also reported in the Washington Post, New York Times ("Murals to Honor Negro in America", December 3, 1942, p. 27), and other newspapers

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Recorder of Deeds Building

Name of Property

Washington, DC

County and State

Section 9 Page 20

The deadline for submissions was March 1, 1943. On April 2, a jury composed of muralists Henry Billings and Kindred Macleary, Howard University art department chair James V. Herring, Dr. Tompkins, Edward B. Rowan, and Nan Watson, a painter married to Forbes Watson, made final selections from 167 sketches by 127 artists.<sup>82</sup> Selectees were notified by letter on April 5<sup>th</sup>. A press release announced that the winners' wide geographic dispersion and almost equal female-male ratio, as well as the inclusion of accomplished African-American painter William Edouard Scott, proved the fairness of the blind selection process.<sup>83</sup> Indeed, many of the artists selected had already painted murals for public buildings, and would have distinguished careers in the arts. (Attachment A presents a synopsis of the artists' careers and details about their murals.)

Creating the murals was a multi-stage process in which the artists produced iterative sketches and colored drawings called "cartoons" in increasing scale. Each preliminary version was critiqued and approved by Edward Rowan before the final mural could be painted on fabric and shipped to Washington for installation.<sup>84</sup> The "Courageous Act of Cyrus Tiffany at the Battle of Lake Erie" commission illustrates how Dr. Tompkins, federal arts administrators, and artists interacted to produce a distinctive mural.

By the spring of 1943, twenty-four year old Martyl Schweig of Saint Louis had been receiving Treasury Section commissions for three years.<sup>85</sup> In January 1940, she had received a letter from Edward Rowan offering a noncompetitive \$750 commission to create a mural for the Russell, Kansas post office.<sup>86</sup> It is unclear how Schweig attracted the Section's attention. Likely it was through Henry Varnum Poor and Boardman Robinson, her teachers at the Colorado Institute of Art, who were often consulted by the Section. Undeterred by conflicts with the Russell postmaster, who successfully obstructed relocation of a light fixture from the midst of the mural, she solicited a noncompetitive commission to paint a mural in the new post office at St. Genevieve, Missouri in March 1941.<sup>87</sup> After selling several small watercolors to the Section in 1942, Schweig submitted several ROD building competition entries. The jury selected her design for "Cyrus Tiffany."

From its inception, the "Cyrus Tiffany" commission evoked some of the political and racial controversy historically associated with the Recorder of Deeds office. Schweig's composition required that Perry hold his sword in his left hand. Rowan's notification letter asked whether Perry had actually been left-handed, because

<sup>82</sup>"Jury Selecting Murals," *Washington Post*, April 3, 1943, B1.

<sup>83</sup>An original copy of the press release is contained in the Martyl Schweig Langsdorf Papers, Box 1 at the Smithsonian Institution Archive of American Art in Washington, DC. See also "Art Notes," *New York Times*, April 9, 1943, 25.

<sup>84</sup>Marling.48-49, states that this process was devised by Rowan at least in part to nip controversial approaches in the bud.

<sup>85</sup>Schweig's personal papers were reviewed at the Smithsonian Institution Archive of American Art in Washington, DC on April 21, 2011. Biographical notes are taken from a resume and various catalogs contained in her files.

<sup>86</sup>Edward Rowan to Martyl Schweig. Unpublished Letter of January 8, 1940. Smithsonian Institution Archive of American Art. Martyl Schweig Langsdorf Papers, Box 1.

<sup>87</sup> Martyl Schweig to Edward Rowan. Unpublished Letter of March 8, 1941. Smithsonian Institution Archive of American Art. Martyl Schweig Langsdorf Papers, Box 1.



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Recorder of Deeds Building

Name of Property

Washington, DC

County and State

Section 9 Page 21

“otherwise it raises too many questions.”<sup>88</sup> In May, 1943, approximately one month after writing to Schweig, Rowan received a letter from a “Miss P. Hesse” of Saint Louis seeking to debunk the suggestion that “a negro” [sic] had had anything to do with saving Commander Perry’s life. The letter also voiced extremely detailed artistic and historically-referenced factual criticisms of a small reproduction of Schweig’s entry sketch printed in the *Post-Dispatch*. It included an underlined complaint that Perry “is holding his sword in his left hand.”<sup>89</sup> Oddly, while painting the Russell Post Office mural in 1940, Schweig had received a letter erroneously alleging that everyone in her wheat-harvesting scene was left-handed. Perhaps left-handedness in art was interpreted as a covert subversive political symbol in some circles.<sup>90</sup> On June 14, 1943, Schweig laid the issue to rest by reporting that a famous statue in Philadelphia showed Perry holding his sword in his left hand and stating that he had been ambidextrous.<sup>91</sup> This curious incident illustrates the extent to which decisions about a municipal building in the District of Columbia were considered a matter for national comment.

Schweig’s commission also shows the Section of Fine Arts’ and Dr. Tompkins’ careful attention to how effectively the murals conveyed the project’s theme, as well as their artistic standards. Rowan’s notification letter of April 5th requested that Schweig “use a more appealing type” to represent Tiffany, as her sketch made him “entirely too savage.”<sup>92</sup> A criticism of her preliminary cartoon voiced by Dr. Tompkins and relayed by Rowan in letters of June 23rd and 25th was that “it is not necessary to show [Tiffany] with a flat nose and kinky hair”, adding that there should be another “soldier of color” in Perry’s boat, and more shell bursts in the background to enhance the sense of danger.<sup>93</sup> After reviewing her revised cartoon, Rowan wrote insistently on July 27th, with his usual “Dear Martyl” replaced by a less-friendly “Dear Miss Schweig”:

The figure of Tiffany creates something of a delicate problem and I must ask you to try to create a somewhat more pleasing and appealing character. The painting is going into a building under the

<sup>88</sup>Edward Rowan to Martyl Schweig. Unpublished Letter of April 5, 1943. Smithsonian Institution Archive of American Art. Martyl Schweig Langsdorf Papers, Box 1.

<sup>89</sup>P. Hesse to Edward Rowan. Unpublished Letter of May 2, 1943. Smithsonian Institution Archive of American Art. Martyl Schweig Langsdorf Papers, Box 1.

<sup>90</sup>The 1940 letter may have come directly to Schweig, as her papers contain no cover letter from Rowan. In 1943, a museum exhibit organized by Schweig’s mother and others was under attack by an organization called “St. Louis Citizens for Conservative Art.” Schweig’s papers include a copy of a leaflet and a number of clippings which contain letters to the *Post-Dispatch* editor from both her mother, Aimee Schweig, and the anonymous “Citizens for Conservative Art”.

<sup>91</sup>Martyl Schweig to Edward Rowan. Unpublished Letter of March 8, 1941. Smithsonian Institution Archive of American Art. Martyl Schweig Langsdorf Papers, Box 1.

<sup>92</sup>Edward Rowan to Martyl Schweig. Unpublished Letter of April 5, 1943. Smithsonian Institution Archive of American Art. Martyl Schweig Langsdorf Papers, Box 1.

<sup>93</sup>William J. Tompkins, quoted in Edward Rowan to Martyl Schweig. Unpublished Letters of June 23 and 25, 1943. Smithsonian Institution Archive of American Art. Martyl Schweig Langsdorf Papers, Box 1.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Recorder of Deeds Building

Name of Property

Washington, DC

County and State

Section 9 Page 22

management of members of the Colored race and it is essential that no objection is raised to the treatment of a Negro...<sup>94</sup>

By October, further revisions had restored good relations, and Rowan congratulated Schweg for responding to an extensive critique of her draftsmanship by having sailors from Great Lakes Naval Station check the rigging of Perry’s boat.<sup>95</sup> However, Schweg then missed her December 1, 1943 delivery date for the finished mural, creating a major problem because the artists had collectively hired Fred Crittenden of Brooklyn to install their murals just after the New Year.

Schweg’s completed mural was not received until January 22, 1944, and she was forced to pay Crittenden’s additional expenses.<sup>96</sup> A consequence of her tardiness was that the public unveiling of the murals was postponed permanently. Dr. Tompkins, recently released from the hospital after months of illness, hoped to reschedule the ceremony for early summer, but suffered a relapse and died on August 4, 1944 at age 60.<sup>97</sup> Ed Rowan might have intended to hold an unveiling in Doctor Tompkins’ memory when wartime travel restrictions were lifted, but he died in 1946, while still in his forties. Neither a publicized unveiling nor a building dedication was ever held.

## The ROD Building Murals in an Artistic Context

The ROD building murals were created at the end of the golden age of mural painting in the Americas and perhaps the world. In the 1930s, murals had become increasingly prominent as a dramatic, populist art form and attracted attention to the work of such artists as Diego Rivera, who received highly publicized commissions for major buildings. Pablo Picasso’s “Guernica” was painted as a mural for the 1937 Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne in Paris. In the United States, such prominent artists as Thomas Hart Benton, Rockwell Kent, and Reginald Marsh painted murals for government buildings, some of them commissions from the Section of Fine Arts.

The ROD murals are unique, compared to the Section’s usual template. Typically, the Section specified that murals in such locally-focused federal buildings as post offices feature scenes from the community’s history

<sup>94</sup>Edward Rowan to Martyl Schweg. Unpublished Letter of July 27, 1943. Smithsonian Institution Archive of American Art. Martyl Schweg Langsdorf Papers, Box 1.

<sup>95</sup>Edward Rowan to Martyl Schweg. Unpublished Letter of October 14, 1943. Smithsonian Institution Archive of American Art. Martyl Schweg Langsdorf Papers, Box 1.

<sup>96</sup>Schweg assured Rowan that her mural would be shipped on January 6th, then promised January 10th, 12 days before the mural actually arrived in Washington. Rowan was plainly angered but, in his letter he notifying her that she would have to rebate about 5% of her commission, he crossed out the typescript “the neglect was on your part” and handwrote “and I am very sorry about it.”

<sup>97</sup>“Dr. W.J. Tompkins Dies,” *Washington Post*, August 5, 1944, 2.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Recorder of Deeds Building

Name of Property

Washington, DC

County and State

Section 9 Page 23

and landscapes. Only two of the ROD Building mural subjects, “Frederick Douglass Imploring President Lincoln” and “Benjamin Banneker and the District of Columbia” have a geographic relationship to Washington.

The murals at many Federal Triangle buildings illustrate the agency’s goals and programs. However, none of the ROD Building murals illustrates the Office of the Recorder’s functions. Although Dr. Tompkins’ seven chosen subjects convey a theme of inclusion and relate to the nation’s collective involvement in war, they also reflect the political and social realities of his day. Four murals (“Crispus Attucks at the Boston Massacre”, “Cyrus Tiffany at the Battle of Lake Erie”, “Colonel Shaw and the 54th Massachusetts Regiment at the Battle of Fort Wagner”, and “Andrew Jackson’s Troops Assisted by Slaves at the Battle of New Orleans”) depict African-Americans engaged in patriotic struggle, while the Douglass and Lincoln mural shows a conference concerning war. African-American figures appear in other federally-funded murals and are the focus of the 1936 WPA-created murals at New York City’s Harlem Hospital. However, the Recorder of Deeds murals present a unique gallery of African-Americans in heroic situations. At the same time, all seven murals portray African-Americans assisting powerful whites. With the exception of Douglass, African-American activists like Booker T. Washington are not depicted.

While the ROD Building murals express a unique thematic program, they embody the rich artistic traditions associated with Section of Fine Art’s murals. They range from Ethel Magafan’s richly-toned landscape of slaves piling cotton bales as bulwarks at the “Battle of New Orleans” to Hershel Levitt’s dramatically-writhing “Crispus Attucks” and the dark, swirling hues of the “Courageous Acts of Cyrus Tiffany.” Maxine Seelbinder’s “Benjamin Banneker” is a colorful, folk art-like styling that suggests the naïve vibrancy of proletarian murals, while William Edouard Scott’s “Douglass and Lincoln” is a more finely-wrought academic ensemble portrait. Austin Mecklem’s “Matthew Henson”, the smallest work, and Carlos Lopez’s “Death of Colonel Shaw at Fort Wagner”, the largest, have been cited as the most outstanding paintings in the series.

While none of the ROD building muralists achieved the fame of Benton, Kent, or Marsh, each was an accomplished artist whose body of work has achieved recognition. While none of the ROD building murals has the individual stature of a “Guernica”, all possess high artistic values. In addition to their merits as individual works, they represent a significant and distinguishable entity as a thematic group.

## Additional Artistic Works

Three other works complete the ROD Building’s artistic program.

William Edouard Scott’s “Groundbreaking Day” (1944) is an oil painting on canvas commemorating the 1940 ceremony. Although it shows Dr. Tompkins in the foreground with FDR, it has been criticized for relegating

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Recorder of Deeds Building

Name of Property

Washington, DC

County and State

Section 9 Page 24

other African-American attendees to the shadows and more prominently depicting several white dignitaries who were not actually present.<sup>98</sup>

“The Four Freedoms” by noted African-American sculptor Dr. Selma Burke is a plaque with a relief depicting Franklin D. Roosevelt in profile. The details of its creation are somewhat obscured by the frenzied pace of events in wartime Washington, as well as Dr. Burke’s life-long insistence that her design was plagiarized to create the Roosevelt dime. Although this claim is often repeated as established fact, it remains controversial, with numismatic experts taking positions both for and against.<sup>99</sup> Burke won a design contest to sculpt Roosevelt that is alternatively described as conducted by the Section of Fine Arts, the District Commissioners, or the Commission on Fine Arts. Newspapers later reported that the plaque had been created for the ROD building, and the response of Roosevelt’s critics to the use of public funds for the heroic depiction of a living president in a public space would have been interesting.

Burke had two sittings to sketch the President, the first of which reportedly took place in January 1943, during the ROD building mural competition.<sup>100</sup> In March 1945, Eleanor Roosevelt visited Burke’s New York studio to view the final drawing and found some details unsatisfactory.<sup>101</sup> Burke was offered a third sitting with Roosevelt at the next month’s United Nations Conference in San Francisco, but he died on its eve. She quickly finished her relief, which was exhibited at a New York gallery in July 1945.<sup>102</sup>

The dedication of the plaque at the Deeds Building on September 24, 1945 was a somewhat somber event, a memorial ceremony to Roosevelt which nonetheless incorporated musical performances and speeches that recalled the groundbreaking ceremony of August 1940. Frederick Weaver, Frederick Douglass’ grandson, unveiled the plaque. Speaking just a month after the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombings and the end of World War II, President Harry F. Truman spoke on the choice between following Roosevelt’s ideal of brotherhood and nuclear inferno. Melvin Shepherd, the incumbent recorder, recalled Dr. Tompkins and reported that the installation of the plaque was the realization of one of the late doctor’s dreams.<sup>103</sup> Ms. Burke’s sculpture, which sought to capture Roosevelt’s essence as a “young Roman gladiator”, has been widely reproduced and become iconic.<sup>104</sup> In later life, she became a noted teacher of sculpture whose accomplishments

<sup>98</sup> Susan Curtis. *Colored Memories: A Biographer's Quest for the Elusive Lester A. Walton*. (Columbia, Mo: University of Missouri) 2008, p. 100-106. Lester Walton was a speaker at the groundbreaking ceremony.

<sup>99</sup> “Sculptor Selma Burke,” *Washington Post*, March 17, 1975. B1 presents Burke’s account without qualification or acknowledgement of the controversy.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> Robert Van Ryzin. *Fascinating Facts, Myths, and Mysteries About U.S. Coins*. (Iola, WI: Krause Publications, nd) 199-202 and “Mrs. Roosevelt Now Owns Min, Coat,” *Washington Post*, March 8, 1945, 12.

<sup>102</sup> Van Ryzin. 202.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid* and “Truman Praises Roosevelt Ideals,” *Washington Post*, September 25, 1945, 1

<sup>104</sup> Van Ryzin. 202.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Recorder of Deeds Building

Name of Property

Washington, DC

County and State

Section 9 Page 25

were recognized by a Pennsylvania state proclamation and major exhibit at the Lyndon Baines Johnson Museum.<sup>105</sup>

Another addition, a plaster cast of a statue of a young shirtless Abraham Lincoln, is the most puzzling object at the ROD Building. Although some internet sources state that the cast was exhibited at the 1876 Centennial Exhibition, it is actually a replica of a circa 1940 statue in the Los Angeles Federal Building by James Lee Hansen. It apparently commemorates the inauguration of the recorder position during Lincoln's administration.

### The ROD Building as a Functioning Symbol

The ROD building housed the Recorder of Deeds Office for more than sixty years. In 2005, its murals and rich history were acknowledged by a city historic marker. However, after the Recorders Office moved in 2008, the building was used for storage. In 2010, it temporarily flooded, and its future remains unclear. Particular concerns have been raised about possible plans to remove the murals, which are an integral element of the building.

### Bibliography

Beckham, Sue Bridewell. *Depression Post Office Murals and Southern Culture*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989.

Contreras, Belisario. *Tradition and Innovation in New Deal Art*. Lewisburg, Pa: Bucknell University Press, 1983.

Curtis, Susan. *Colored Memories: A Biographer's Quest for the Elusive Lester A. Walton*. Columbia, Mo: University of Missouri Press, 2008.

Douglass, Frederick. *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. Mineola, NY: Courier Dover Press, 1892, reprinted 2003,

Harris, Jonathan. *Federal Art and National Culture*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Koyl, George S. *Wyatt's American Architects*. R.S. Bowker, 1962

Lee, Antoinette J. . *Architects to the Nation: The Rise and Decline of the Supervising Architect's Office*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000)

---

<sup>105</sup> Van Ryzin. 202-213 details Burke's accomplishments and examines the controversy about the Roosevelt dime in detail.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Recorder of Deeds Building

Name of Property

Washington, DC

County and State

Section 9 Page 26

Marling, Karal Ann. *Wall-to-Wall America*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982.

Melosch, Barbara. *Engendering Culture*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991.

McKinzie, Richard. *The New Deal for Artists*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973.

National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form. *Sixteenth Street Historic District (Boundary Expansion)*. 2006. Washington, DC: National Park Service

*Northeastern Reporter, Volume 35* Chicago: West Publishing Company, 1894

Park, Marlene and Gerald Markowitz. *Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984.

Van Ryzin, Robert. *Fascinating Facts, Myths, and Mysteries About U.S. Coins*. (Iola, WI: Krause Publications, nd)

Wyeth, Nathan C. "Washington Municipal Center", *Pencil Points* (New York: Reinhold Publishing Corporation) September 1939.

Martyl Schweig Langsdorf Papers, reviewed at Smithsonian Institution Archive of American Art, 770 Ninth Street NW, Washington, DC, on April 21, 2011.

## List of Illustrations

Number	Title
1	Recorder of Deeds Building (April 3, 2011)
2	Facade Details, Recorder of Deeds Building (April 3, 2011)
3	Gibson Fahenstock House, 2311 Massachusetts Avenue NW (April 17, 2011)
4	Key Bridge (March 27, 2011)
5	Site Plan for Proposed Municipal Center, Nathan C. Wyeth, ( <i>Pencil Points</i> , September 1939, p. 580.)
6-9	Images of Recorder of Deeds Murals and "Groundbreaking Day" by William Edouard Scott (from Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Online Collection, accessed at <a href="http://www.loc.gov/pictures/">http://www.loc.gov/pictures/</a> on April 21, 2011.

Recorder of Deeds Building  
Name of Property

Washington, DC  
County and State

## 10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property \_\_\_\_\_

### UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

1	Zone	Easting	Northing	3	Zone	Easting	Northing
2	Zone	Easting	Northing	4	Zone	Easting	Northing

See continuation sheet

### Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet)

### Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet)

## 11. Form Prepared By

name/title D.P. Sefton

Organization DC Preservation League date 7/01/10

street & number 401 F Street NW Room 324 Telephone \_\_\_\_\_

city or town Washington, DC state DC zip code 20001

## Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

### Continuation Sheets

#### Maps

A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

#### Photographs

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

### Additional Items

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

## Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO)

Name \_\_\_\_\_

street & number \_\_\_\_\_ Telephone \_\_\_\_\_

city or town \_\_\_\_\_ state \_\_\_\_\_ zip code \_\_\_\_\_

**Paperwork Reduction Statement:** This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et. seq.).

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC20503.