

**Historic Property** Old US Post Office  
**Inventory Report for** 801 South Capitol Way Olympia, Thurston, 98501

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**LOCATION SECTION**

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**Historic Name:** Old US Post Office **Field Site No.:** 908  
**Common Name:** Federal Building (#34-902) **OAHP No.:**  
**Property Address:** 801 South Capitol Way Olympia, Thurston, 98501  
**Comments:** OLYMPIA

**County** **Township/Range/EW** **Section** **1/4 Sec** **1/4 1/4 Sec** **Quadrangle**  
 T18R02W 14 SW TUMWATER

**UTM Reference**  
**Zone:** 10 **Spatial Type:** Point **Acquisition Code:** TopoZone.com  
**Sequence:** 0 **Easting:** 507590 **Northing:** 5208560

**Tax No./Parcel No.** **Plat/Block/Lot**  
37200800100 Browns Blk 8 & 9 Lot 1

**Supplemental Map(s)** **Acreage**  
City of Olympia Planning Development .52

**IDENTIFICATION SECTION**

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**Field Recorder:** Shanna Stevenson **Date Recorded:** 7/1/1997 **Survey Name:** OLYMPIA

**Owner's Name:** State of WA Dept of General Administration **Owner Address:** PO Box 41015 **City/State/Zip:** Olympia, WA 98504

**Classification:** Building **Resource Status** **Comments**  
**Within a District?** No Survey/Inventory  
**Contributing?** National Register  
State Register  
Local Register

**National Register Nomination:** U.S. POST OFFICE  
**Local District:**  
**National Register District/Thematic Nomination Name:**

**DESCRIPTION SECTION**

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**Historic Use:** Government - Post Office  
**Current Use:** Government - Government Office

**Plan:** T-Shape **No. of Stories:** 3

**Structural System:** Stone - Uncut

**Changes to plan:** Moderate **Changes to interior:** Moderate  
**Changes to original cladding:** Intact **Changes to other:**  
**Changes to windows:** Extensive **Other (specify):**

**Cladding** Stone **Foundation** Stone  
**Style** Beaux Arts - Neo-Classical **Form/Type**  
**Roof Material** Asphalt / Composition - Rolled **Roof Type** Hip

**NARRATIVE SECTION**

Study Unit

Other

Date Of Construction: 1914

Architecture/Landscape Architecture

Architect: James Knox Taylor

Politics/Government/Law

Builder:

Engineer:

Property appears to meet criteria for the National Register of Historic Places:

No

Property is located in a historic district (National and/or local):

No

Property potentially contributes to a historic district (National and/or local):

**Statement of Significance**

The Federal Building in the early 20th century, as now, was in the center of a historically significant area. At the turn of the century, the site of the Federal Building was occupied by the three-story Victorian style Hotel Olympia. The hotel's ornate and spacious lobby was the after-hours gathering place of state capitol legislators and lobbyist. In 1904, Hotel Olympia burned to the ground during a spectacular fire. The conveniently leveled site was a natural location for the town's first designed post office building. The first post office in Washington State had been founded only fifty years previously, in nearby Nisqually on January 8, 1850, by Colonel Michael T. Simmons. Later, Simmons moved the post office into a combination house-store in Olympia. There is evidence that although it was named at Nisqually, Simmons always kept the office at Olympia. In the intervening years before statehood in 1889, the post office was moved many times by new postmasters. In the 1890s, Olympia's post office was located in the west wing of the Old Capitol Building. As the town continued to grow, state government business created an increasing demand for expanded mail service. During this period the post office was moved recently to larger quarters. On March 10, 1908, Congress authorized funds for the purchase of a site for a new Olympia post office. Two years later, Semper-Kale Investment company sold their 150 ft. x 150 ft. parcel on the corner of Valencia and Main Streets for \$15,500. The site was ideally located half-way between the downtown businesses to the north and the proposed State Capitol Campus to the south. One block to the east was the Northern Pacific Railroad Depot. The Richardsonian-Romanesque "Old" State Capitol Building was within sight across Main Street. On June 25, 1910, Congress authorized initial funds for design and construction of Olympia's post office building. The three story Federal Building (formerly U. Post Office, Olympia) was constructed between 1912 and 1914. In addition to providing space for the town's main post office and postmaster, the new building was to house offices of the Department of the Interior, the U. Surveyor General, and the Forest Service. The project was prepared under the auspices of the Federal Works branch of the Department of the Treasury. Working plans were approved in November 1910, by the Office of the Supervising Architect of the Treasury Department. James Knox Taylor was Supervising Architect at that time. Born in 1857 in Knoxville, Illinois, James Knox Taylor completed his architectural education with a two-year course at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Later, he worked in Boston, New York (in the office of Cass Gilbert), St. Paul, Minnesota, and Philadelphia. In 1885, he moved to Washington, D. After three years as a Senior Draftsman in the Office of the Supervising Architect, he succeeded to the position of Supervising Architect. Through his fifteen years as head of the department, James Knox Taylor was in charge of design and construction of numerous government buildings; among them several post office buildings in the East and the U. Post Office and Custom House in San Francisco, California. After retiring from government service in 1912, (before ground was broken for the Federal Building in Olympia), he set up private practice in Boston. He later moved to Yonkers, New York, and finally, to Tampa, Florida, where he passed away in 1929. It is difficult to ascertain from the original drawings the extent of the Supervising Architect's involvement in the project. It seems safe to assume that, as in any sizeable architectural office, several persons contributed to the design, each according to his specialty. Each sheet was initialed by Superintendents of the structural, drafting and mechanical divisions of the office. It is possible that the Senior Draftsman in charge of the entire project was Taylor's successor, Oscar Wenderoth (see below). The sandstone cornerstone at the southeast corner of the building, facing Valencia Street, is inscribed "FRANKLIN MACVEIGH, SECRETARY OF THE TREASURY, JAMES KNOX TAYLOR, SUPERVISING ARCHITECT. MCMXXII. E. Heald was the structural engineer of the steel-framed, brick and stone bearing wall structure. On May 24, 1912, a construction contract was awarded to King Lumber Company of Charlottesville, VA. King's low bid of \$92,700, covered labor and materials, including the substitution of a more economical terra cotta for sandstone at column capitals and entablature. Work was to have been completed by September 1, 1913. However, shortly after the contract's award, James Knox Taylor resigned. In the first months of 1913 important changes in materials were made by the office of the new Supervising Architect, Oscar Wenderoth. Oscar Wenderoth had trained in several architectural firms in his native Philadelphia before joining the office of the Supervising Architect in 1897. After working 10 years as a draftsman, he was promoted to Chief Draftsman. Five years later, in 1912, he became Supervising Architect. For the next 17 years he was responsible for design and construction of many government buildings, mainly post offices. Owing to failing eyesight, he resigned his position in 1929. The Wenderoth office's 1913 additions to the contract called for a sandstone entablature, terra cotta hollow tile interior partitions and steel-concrete construction of second and third floors. These changes raised the total construction cost to \$120,227. The final completion date was extended to June 20, 1914. Ground for the site was cleared and a four foot deep excavation was made in August of 1912. Laying of the brick foundation continued through September of 1912, but work seems to have been stopped during the change-over of Supervising Architects and the subsequent debate over change orders. In October, 1913, work was resumed with the application of sandstone blocks to the brick foundation. During the first months of 1914, structural steel framing and stone walls arose in the ground floor. By April, 1914, columns of the main facade were in place and a stone carver was at work atop a scaffold carving the intricate capitals. During the summer, roof and interior partitions were erected. By August, the building's exterior was finished with the addition of the cornice. Interior finishes were completed before Christmas, 1914, making the building ready for occupancy (except for furniture still in transit) in early January, 1915. The Post Office Building, inaugurated on January 6, 1915, was to become an important part of the Olympia community. An early instruction booklet to Post Office patrons state that "the Post Office Department is more closely allied with the interested and everyday life of the masses of people than any other branch of the general government, than any other one business in the various communities. . . The post office was, in effect, the communications center of the growing state capital town. Residents waited in the spacious lobby for news from the other parts of the U. Mail was brought in three times a day from the Northern Pacific Depot. In addition, there were daily boat deliveries from other parts of the Puget Sound. Mail was delivered to homes twice daily, mornings and evenings. Post office boxes of regular customers lined the lobby walls and a general delivery window served less accessible customers. Parcel Post made the post office an important center of exchange. In the early 1900s there was neither a limit to the weight of properly packaged first and second class parcels nor a restriction of the size of a package. The postmaster did warn, however, that "queen bees, and the Australian lady bird, in their proper castles, are the only living creatures that can be mailed according to the law."

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"Because savings and checking accounts had not become common at the turn of the century, the post office became a major banking center. Through the postal Savings Plan, townspeople could purchase savings certificates in denominations of \$1, 2, 10, 20 and \$50, which would draw interest as savings bonds do today. The total balance of any one depositor was limited to \$500. The post office also sold Postal Money Orders which were used much like personal checks are used today. Daily money transactions created the need for an elaborate system of supervision. The postal inspector assigned to the post office was a person of authority. As was common to all post officers of the era, an enclosed catwalk was suspended above the post office workroom. From this "lookout" the inspector could discretely peer through small port-holes down to the post office workroom, employee lounges and restrooms. It has been said that while the inspector had no "real" jurisdiction over the daily workings of the post office, his word was generally followed to the letter. The postmaster was often a politically appointed official who not only supervised the workings of the post office, but was also involved in community activities. James Doherty was the first postmaster to serve at the new Olympia post office. Today, the OFB is still an important part of Olympia's urban street scape. The principal facade looks down upon Capitol Way, the city's major north-south arterial linking the Neo-Classical Revival buildings of the State Capitol Campus with the brick buildings of the CBD. The OFB lies in the middle of the two-mile stretch between these two city centers. From the OFB steps one can look southward down Capitol Way to the Capitol Campus; looking forth the CBD can be seen; a block away due east one can see the rusticated sandstone arches of the Richardsonian Romanesque Old State Capitol Building. In recent years most of the early 20th century buildings on Capitol Way between the Capitol Campus and the downtown have been destroyed. The street is now predominantly lined with newly constructed glass and steel (or masonry) office-commercial buildings. This has made the stone OFB, with its classical colonnade, an even more conspicuous urban landmark. The Olympia Federal Building represents an important era of this state capital's history. Designed in the Neo-Classical Revival style, the building expresses the sense of security and stability that public buildings of this period were designed to evoke. These qualities, coupled with the communications activity that occurred within the building, make the Federal Building a historically significant seat of federal government within the Olympia community.

**Description of  
Physical  
Appearance**

The Olympia Federal Building (OFB), built between 1912 and 1914, is in the middle of a historically significant district within Washington's State Capital City. The building is located mid-way between the Central Business District two blocks to the north and the State Capitol Campus two blocks to the south. The Federal Building's Neo-Classical principal facade faces Capitol Way (formerly called "main Street"), an active arterial linking the Capital Campus with the CBD. Across the street is the Richardsonian-Romanesque Old State Capitol Building (now on the National Register). The 101 ft. x 54 ft. OFB covers two-thirds of the site. The Capitol Way facade is set back from the street by a 12 ft. wide sidewalk and a 20 ft. wide lawn, planted with bushy evergreens. The Valencia Avenue facade of the building is set back from the street by a 12 ft. wide sidewalk and an 8 ft. wide planting strip. A driveway separates the north facade of the FBI from adjacent buildings. A 50 ft. wide paved strip at the rear of the building provides a loading area and 24 parking spaces. BUILDING - GENERAL The building is basically a three-storey rectangular block. A one storey high, 63 ft. x 23 ft. addition was made to the rear of the building in 1929 (in order to provide more room for the post office workroom). Currently, the building has a gross area of 23,385 sq. ft. over three floors. A full basement, divided into mechanical, storage rooms, and offices, occupies the entire 101 ft. x 54 ft. foundation of the building. Basement offices are illuminated by shoulder-high windows (at ground-level outside). On the first floor the lobby and work spaces of the post office were remodeled into individual offices in 1964. The first floor has a gross area of 7340 sq. ft. The second floor has maintained most of its original office-corridor layout and has a gross area of 5300 sq. ft. In accord with original designs, the third floor occupies the attic space, which is illuminated by five west-facing dormer windows. EXTERIOR - GENERAL The OFB is of the Neo-Classical Revival style, a style typical to many Government buildings after the turn-of-the-century. The entire composition of the facades gives this early post office an outward appearance of solidity and permanence. Characteristic to the style, the building makes restrained use of classical orders (columns, entablatures, ornament, etc. ). The principal facade is dominated by a row of fluted, two-storey tall Corinthian columns. Smooth stone walls on other facades of the building have little articulation and act to emphasize the principal facade. A pediment projects over each of the two entrance doors flanking the main facade colonnade. All windows are linteled and the denticulated entablature is simple and refined, without extravagant ornamentation. A gently sloping truncated hip roof caps the entire building, leading the vision skyward past the convolutions of the cornice. STRUCTURE - GENERAL The structure is bearing wall brick and Tenino sandstone, with a steel-concrete superstructure. Interior terra cotta tile partitions are surfaced with smooth plaster. All facades of the building (except part of the 1929 addition at the rear of the building) are faced with 1 ft. x 2 ft. smooth sandstone blocks, laid in stretcher bond (i. e. blocks are laid lengthwise in every course). The grey sandstone came from Tenino Stone Company's quarry in the nearby town of Tenino. Columns, capitals, frieze and entablature are all of Tenino sandstone. The foundation has concrete spread footings with concrete piers extending into the clay strata of the site. Floors are concrete flat slab. Sloping sections of the truncated hip roof still have their original sheet-tin cladding. The roof's horizontal portion is built-up asphalt. PRINCIPAL FACADE Reminiscent of a classic Greek temple, the OFB sits upon a 4 ft. high basement. The upper limit of this "podium" is defined by a molded sandstone plinth. The dominant facade at Capitol Way is distinguished by a colonnade of Corinthian columns rising from the basement course two stories to the entablature. The columns are set into a 62 ft. long x 35 ft. high bay which is recessed 3 ft. into the smooth sandstone wall. Corinthian capitals were carved in place, according to the models of Lombard and Ludwig, Architectural Sculptors, Washington, D. C. Seven window bays, evenly spaced between columns, are recessed into the smooth sandstone wall behind the colonnade. Each window bay is composed of a 10 ft. tall double sash casement window on the ground storey and a pair of 4 ft. tall casement windows on the second storey. First storey windows were formerly divided into six panels with a glazed transom above, and second storey windows were divided into four panes. These have subsequently been replaced with aluminum-framed windows, each four-pane window having two operable vents at the bottom. A sandstone string course, highlighted by a Greek key fret, separates first and second storey windows. A formal entrance is located at either side of the colonnaded central bay. Because the central bay is recessed into the building, the two flanking entries appear to project from the facade. Each doorway is a 5 ft. wide x 8 ft. high opening, with double-swing aluminum doors (the original bronze revolving doors were removed into 1956). A sandstone molding with carved medallions surrounds each door. A wrought iron grille covers the transom above each door and a classical pediment, supported by scrolled sandstone brackets, accentuates the opening. Granite steps rise 4 ft. from the Capitol Way sidewalk up to each entrance (in 1964, steps leading to the northernmost entrance were replaced with a new exit door to the basement). Each entry door is flanked by a pair of wrought iron lamps, with claw bases and opalescent round globes. SIDE FACADES The smooth sandstone facades at Valencia (now Talcott) Street and the alleyway off Capitol Way accentuate the colonnaded front facade. The simplified side facades have a neutralizing effect on the overall composition of the building; they carry through the rhythm and proportion of the main facade without detracting from the importance of the main facade. Each side facade is divided into three 8 ft. wide x 24 ft. high window bays recessed 3 inches into the smooth wall. The first and second storey windows of each bay

have the same size and configuration as the windows of the main facade's central bay. The cornice over the side facades is identical to that of the front facade. REAR FACADE The 1929 addition to the rear of the building, though not as richly detailed as earlier portion of the building, complements the overall Neo-Classical design. The cornice on the addition is simple (without dentils) and the rear wall is stucco (rather than smooth sandstone). Five 6 ft. wide x 10 ft. tall windows along the west wall admit light into the interior workroom. With the addition of a suspended ceiling inside, the windows have been shortened somewhat. INTERIOR - FIRST FLOOR Originally an ornate public lobby extended the entire 101 ft. length of the Federal Building's main facade. Post office lock-boxes and teller's windows lined the wall opposite the tall lobby windows. White Alaska marble was used for cross strips and bases of the lobby's white terrazzo floor. A spacious post office workroom was located directly behind the wall of lock-boxes. In 1964, after the post office moved to a new building nearby, the first floor lobby and workroom were extensively revised to accommodate individual offices. Today, the only remnant of the original first floor layout is the stairway, which curves up the lobby's west wall to the second floor. The treads are medium white Alaska marble with cast iron risers. The curving hardwood handrail is fixed to ornate wrought iron balusters. SECOND FLOOR Because the second floor was always been occupied by the Forest Service, most second floor details have remained undisturbed (with the exception of the addition of carpet and suspended ceilings in individual offices). Second floor offices lining the east and west wall soft the building are separated by a straight 8 ft. wide corridor, running the entire length of the building. The corridor floor is white terrazzo with Medium Alaska marble cross strips and bases. A 3 ft. high paneled wainscot, painted white, lines both sides of the hall. Ceiling and walls are joined by a broad plaster molding. Second floor restrooms still have their original white Alaska marble partitions and wainscots. The with terrazzo floor has a marble base and marble cross strips. THIRD FLOOR The continuous third floor open space was originally used as a drafting room for the Surveyor General. In subsequent years, the drafting room has been divided into office space along the west wall and store rooms along the east wall. The third floor occupies the attic space. Plastered walls, following the slope of the roof, slant inward to a 9 ft. high ceiling. Five dormer windows along the west wall admit light into the offices. The Federal Building embodies an important part of Olympia's architectural and cultural history. The finely proportioned and well constructed Neo-classic building complements the varied styles of other historic buildings in the vicinity. The Neo-Classic Revival image of the Federal Building symbolizes arena at the turn of the century when Government buildings were meant to project an image of security and permanence. As the town's first building specifically designed as a post office, the Federal Building was for many years a principal information center and informal meeting place in the state capital city. Olympia, lying at the southernmost tip of Puget Sound, was founded in 1846 at the western terminus of the Oregon Trail. The town was the first American community north of the Columbia River. In 1853, Olympia became the capitol of Washington Territory and in 1889 was designated State Capitol. The town developed as a log export center, and the urban core still focuses on the harbor. The Central Business District (CBD) developed adjacent to the port. Fourth Avenue and Capitol Way (formerly Main Street), the town's major arterials, were once logging roads connecting Olympia to surrounding communities. The State Capitol Campus overlooks the CBD and the harbor. Surrounding the capitol and downtown re the oldest residences in the city. The Federal Building in the early 20th century, as now, was in the center of a historically significant area. At the turn of the century, the site of the Federal Building was occupied by the three-storey Victorian style Hotel Olympia. The hotel's ornate and spacious lobby was the after-hours gathering place of state capitol legislators and lobbyist. In 1904, Hotel Olympia burned to the ground during a spectacular fire. The conveniently leveled site was a natural location for the town's first designed post office building. The first post office in Washington State had been founded only fifty years previously, in nearby Nisqually on January 8, 1850, by Colonel Michael T. Simmons. Later, Simmons moved the post office into a combination house-store in Olympia. 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In 1885, he moved to Washington, D. C. After three years as a Senior Draftsman in the Office of the Supervising Architect, he succeeded to the position of Supervising Architect. Through his fifteen years as head of the department, James Knox Taylor was in charge of design and construction of numerous government buildings; among them several post office buildings in the East and the U. S. Post Office and Custom House in San Francisco, California. After retiring from government service in 1912, (before ground was broken for the Federal Building in Olympia), he set up private practice in Boston. He later moved to Yonkers, New York, and finally, to Tampa, Florida, where he passed away in 1929. It is difficult to ascertain from the original drawings the extent of the Supervising Architect's involvement in the project. It seems safe to assume that, as in any sizeable architectural office, several persons contributed to the design, each according to his speciality. 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**Major  
Bibliographic  
References**

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2. Drawings. Blueprint Copies of Original Drawings for U.S. Post Office, Olympia, Washington, 1914. Office of the Supervising Architect, Treasury Department. provided by General Services Administration, Auburn Washington.
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4. Mark, Ken. Stalwart stone, the Old Capitol Building Continues to Serve. Olympia: Editorial Offices of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1972.
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9. "Olympia Post Office is Complete in Details." Daily Olympia. January 6, 1915. P.1.
10. Photographs. Set of photographs taken during construction of U.S. Post Office, Olympia, Washington. Dated: August 1, 1912 - November 2, 1914. Provided by General Services Administration, Auburn, Washington.
11. Sapp, Bernice A. Early Sites of Olympia. (Manuscript). Provided by Washington Room, State Library, Olympia, Washington.
12. "Taps for the N.P. Depot." Sunday Olympian. January 16, 1966. P.1.

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13. Withey, Henry F. and Withey, Elsie Rathburn. Biographical Dictionary of American Architects (Deceased). Los Angeles, Calif.: Hennessey and Ingolls, 1970.

14. Writers' Program of the Work Project Administration in the State of Washington. Washington, A Guide to the Evergreen State. Portland, OR.: Binford and Mort, Publishers, 1941, 1972.

INTERVIEWS

Talcott, Noyes, Olympia Historian, Longtime Resident. Interviewed June 13, 1978.

Rodgers, George. Postmaster, Olympia, Washington. Interviewed on June 19, 1978.  
National Register Nomination Written by John Kvapil, GSA Staff

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**PHOTOS**



View of SE Corner

taken 7/1/1997

Photography Neg. No. (Roll No./Frame No.):

41-8A

Comments: