

PROJECT	ROD Modernization	MEETING NO.	5
PROJECT NO.	14841.000	MEETING DATE	12/12/2023
SUBJECT	Historic Preservation	MEETING TIME	11:00 AM
PREPARED BY	Bob Sly	MEETING LOCATION	515 D Street, NW

ATTENDED	NAME	COMPANY
X	Danielle Reinhold	DC Courts Capital Projects
X	Catherine Bane	DC Courts Capital Projects
X	Andrew Lewis	DC Historic Preservation Office
X	Kim Williams	DC Historic Preservation Office
X	Scott Lee	AECOM Construction Management Lead
X	Bob Sly	SmithGroup Project Manager
X	Jim Shepherd	Smithgroup Principal in Charge
X	Grace Lee	SmithGroup Historic Preservation

## NOTES

The DC Courts, SmithGroup and the DC Historic Preservation Office representatives toured the Recorder of Deeds Building at 515 D Street, NW to discuss proposed modernization upgrades as they relate to the Building's historic preservation approach. The team walked the First and Second Floors as well as the exterior. Historic element discussions were intended for preliminary guidance and did not constitute any formal review or direction.

1. The team discussed existing National Register nomination information that is available.
  - J. Shepherd indicated that his version of the nomination didn't seem complete.
  - Ms. Williams indicated she would send an updated version of the NRHP nomination and recommends that an amendment be created if needed with any variations in existing conditions that were described based on SmithGroup's investigation and documentation.
  - Mr. Lewis also provided the DC Inventory Designation as well that specifically lists the Period of Significance of the building to be 1943-1945. The designated interior spaces in that document include:
    - First Floor – All spaces exclusive of stairwell, elevators and delivery room
    - Second Floor – Library and Office of the Recorder.Significant features include:
    - The seven wall murals
    - The Selma Burke base relief of Roosevelt
    - Marble wall paneling, terrazzo flooring (First Floor Lobby)
    - Wood paneling and parquet floor
    - Terrazzo flooring
    - Original ceiling finishes
2. Future Modernization Conceptual Bridging Documentation
  - Mr. Lewis asked that a review by the DC HPO be completed for the 35% Bridging Documents. Review will include the exterior, but also will extend to the interiors for the Lobby, Library, ROD Office Suite, and Liber Room skylights.

### 3. Historical Building Elements

- Lobby Stair Handrails – Mr. Lewis would like to see these retained and to modify to meet code.
- Entry Doors – Mr. Lewis offered some options for the building historic bronze entry doors to consider because they do not currently meet building or accessibility code requirements:
  - i. Provide single door with sidelites on each side to remain symmetrical in the opening.
  - ii. Restore existing doors and install automatic openers. Push button actuator locations TBD. This was the preferred option.
- Building Murals (total of 7 murals) – Mr. Lewis would like to be present when the 7 existing Murals are uncovered for restoration assessment by Evergreene Studios, SmithGroup’s mural conservation consultant. SmithGroup will coordinate the day/time with Mr. Lewis. Currently scheduled to start on January 10<sup>th</sup>.
- Lobby Backlit Signage – Mr. Lewis would like these signage elements to be restored if possible. The team asked if the sign could be replaced with a blank plate or new messaging for the current use. Mr. Lewis preferred supplemental signage be added for wayfinding and to leave the current backlit sign messaging as-is. This may cause confusion for the building tenants and public and will continue to be discussed and evaluated as the design progresses.
- Elevators and Elevator Doorways – SmithGroup indicated that current plan is to continue forward with two elevators, but full replacement of both (one as a stretcher compliant elevator). The back of the shaft will require extending, but the width of the shaft is currently believed to be able to remain the same width. Mr. Lewis wanted to ensure the existing doorway locations were maintained.
- Existing Building Stair – Mr. Lewis would prefer to retain the existing stair and modify the rail (keeping the original) for code compliance even though the stair is not part of the designated interior spaces. SmithGroup explained the existing risers are not code compliant, as they are more than 7” high. Mr. Lewis was not sure who the AHJ would be for this code compliance decision. SmithGroup to survey each riser for the variance in dimensions and send to Mr. Lewis. (See attached stair riser schedule).
- Liber Room – Mr. Lewis determined the Liber Room no longer has any historical elements for preservation, other than the skylights above. SmithGroup will consider the skylight restration in its plans.
- Water (drinking) Fountains – Mr. Lewis indicated the existing waters fountains should be left in place if possible. These fountains are no longer operable or code complaint. The fountain in the Liber Room will likely no longer be accessible by the public once that area becomes an employee suite.
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor Office of the Recorder Suite – Mr. Lewis indicated to try to preserve this suite of rooms and encouraged the team to keep the terrazzo corridor on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor only, as it provides related historical access to the other historical rooms on this floor.
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor Library – Mr. Lewis indicated to try to preserve the Library, fireplace and mural above the fireplace.
- Building Windows – Mr. Lewis indicated to focus on restoration of the windows, rather than replacement. Blast and storm windows can be separate and internal to

the historical windows. SmithGroup indicated they were looking at options where insulated glass can be retrofitted into the existing window frames.

- Exterior East Areaway (at the vehicular ramp) – The team asked if the areaway could be removed and filled to minimize the choke point at the vehicular ramp to the parking garage. Mr. Lewis had no issues with its removal.

#### 4. Future Project Reviews

- Based on the scope of work, Mr. Lewis believed the Historic Preservation Office review can be kept to staff reviews rather than the Historic Preservation Review Board.
- At Draft 35% Bridging documents, Mr. Lewis believed that both CFA and NCPC will want to provide input. CFA comments would be limited to the exterior only.
- The team will look to coordinate a joint meeting with ownership, the design team, DC HPO, CFA and NCPC for a late January/early February meeting to discuss progress and direction.
- DDOT – Mr. Lewis recommended we coordinate any sidewalk updates with DDOT. He thought they may be open to alterations that would extend into the public way (i.e. smaller landing and ramp) rather than more extensive sidewalk upgrades.

STATUS	ACTION ITEMS	NOTES
Complete	Provide updated historic register	Received same week
Pending	Coordinate site visit with Mr. Lewis for mural reveal	Currently Jan. 10 <sup>th</sup> . Will confirm and reach out in early January with confirmation.
Pending	Next meeting with HPO, CFA, NCPC	To be coordinated in January

#### END OF MINUTES

If the information contained in these minutes does not reflect your understanding of the meeting, please advise the writer immediately in writing. Otherwise, we will assume that it is accurate.

#### ATTACHMENTS

- Attachment 1 - Stair Riser Schedule
- Attachment 2 – DC Historic Landmark Designation
- Attachment 3 – NRHP Nomination

**Project Name: DC Courts – Recorder of Deeds Modernization**  
**Proj. Number: – 14841.000**

## Existing Stair Riser Dimensions

The existing stair has a variance in its riser heights and the heights exceed code compliance. The code specifies that risers should not be more than 7 inches in height and not less than 4 inches when measured vertically between the nosing of the adjacent tread. Any variation of risers within a flight of stairs should not be more than 3/8 inch of tolerance. Stair flights with more than a 3/8 inch tolerance have been noted in red below. The design team is seeking guidance on if the existing stair can be retained with the varying riser heights and risers exceeding the 7" maximum code compliance.

### Lower Level – First Floor Stair

Riser #	Height
Lower Level Landing	
LL-1	7-3/8"
LL-2	7-1/2"
LL-3	7-1/2"
LL-4	7-1/2"
LL-5	7-1/2"
LL-6	7-1/2"
Intermediate Landing	
LL-7	7-5/8"
LL-8	7-1/2"
LL-9	7-1/2"
LL-10	7-1/2"
LL-11	7-1/2"
LL-12	7-1/2"
LL-13	7-1/2"
LL-14	7-3/8"
Intermediate Landing	
LL-15	7-5/8"
LL-16	7-3/8"
LL-17	7-1/2"
LL-18	7-1/2"
LL-19	7-3/8"
LL-20	7-1/2"
LL-21	7-3/8"
First Floor Landing	

### First Floor – Second Floor Stair

Riser #	Height
First Floor Landing	
1-1	7-1/2"
1-2	7-5/8"
1-3	7-5/8"
1-4	7-5/8"
1-5	7-5/8"
1-6	7-5/8"
1-7	7-1/2"
Intermediate Landing	
1-8	7-3/4"
1-9	7-1/2"
1-10	7-5/8"
1-11	7-1/2"
1-12	7-5/8"
1-13	7-1/2"
1-14	7-1/2"
1-15	7-5/8"
Intermediate Landing	
1-16	7-7/8"
1-17	7-5/8"
1-18	7-1/2"
1-19	7-5/8"
1-20	7-5/8"
1-21	7-5/8"
1-22	7-5/8"
1-23	7-3/4"
Second Floor Landing	

## Second – Third Floor Stair

Riser #	Height
Second Floor Landing	
2-1	7-5/8"
2-2	7-1/2"
2-3	7-1/2"
2-4	7-1/2"
2-5	7-5/8"
2-6	7-3/8"
Intermediate Landing	
2-7	7-3/4"
2-8	7-5/8"
2-9	7-5/8"
2-10	7-5/8"
2-11	7-5/8"
2-12	7-1/2"
2-13	7-1/2"
2-14	7-1/2"
Intermediate Landing	
2-15	7-3/4"
2-16	7-1/2"
2-17	7-3/8"
2-18	7-1/2"
2-19	7-3/8"
2-20	7-1/2"
Third Floor Landing	

## Third Floor– Penthouse Stair

Riser #	Height
Third Floor Landing	
3-1	7-3/8"
3-2	7-1/2"
3-3	7-1/2"
3-4	7-5/8"
3-5	7-1/2"
3-6	7-3/8"
Intermediate Landing	
3-7	7-3/4"
3-8	7-1/4"
3-9	7-1/2"
3-10	7-1/2"
3-11	7-1/2"
3-12	7-1/2"
3-13	7-1/2"
3-14	7-1/2"
Intermediate Landing	
3-15	7-7/8"
3-16	7-1/4"
3-17	7-1/2"
3-18	7-1/2"
3-19	7-1/2"
3-20	7-1/2"
Penthouse Landing	

# 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 National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. 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.

### 1. Name of Property

Historic name: District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds

Other names/site number: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of related multiple property listing: N/A

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

### 2. Location

Street & number: 515 D Street NW

City or town: Washington, D.C. State: DC County: \_\_\_\_\_

Not For Publication:  Vicinity:

### 3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,

I hereby certify that this X 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 X meets \_\_\_ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:

\_\_\_ national      \_\_\_ statewide      X local

Applicable National Register Criteria:

X A      \_\_\_ B      X C      \_\_\_ D

<p>_____</p> <p><b>Signature of certifying official/Title:</b></p> <p>_____</p> <p><b>State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government</b></p>	<p>_____</p> <p><b>Date</b></p>
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<p>In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria.</p>	
<p>_____</p> <p><b>Signature of commenting official:</b></p> <p>_____</p> <p><b>Title :</b></p>	<p>_____</p> <p><b>Date</b></p> <p>_____</p> <p><b>State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government</b></p>

District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds  
Name of Property

Washington, D.C.  
County and State

**4. National Park Service Certification**

I hereby certify that this property is:

- entered in the National Register
- determined eligible for the National Register
- 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

District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds  
Name of Property

Washington, D.C.  
County and State

**Number of Resources within Property**

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>1</u>	<u>                    </u>	buildings
<u>                    </u>	<u>                    </u>	sites
<u>                    </u>	<u>                    </u>	structures
<u>                    </u>	<u>                    </u>	objects
<u>1</u>	<u>                    </u>	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

**6. Function or Use**

**Historic Functions**

(Enter categories from instructions.)

GOVERNMENT/Government Office/Municipal Building

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Current Functions**

(Enter categories from instructions.)

VACANT/Not in Use

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_



District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds  
Name of Property

Washington, D.C.  
County and State

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## 7. Description

### Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions.)

MODERN MOVEMENT/Art Moderne/Stripped Classical

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**Materials:** (enter categories from instructions.)

Principal exterior materials of the property: Limestone

### Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current physical appearance and condition of the property. Describe contributing and noncontributing resources if applicable. Begin with a **summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, type, style, method of construction, setting, size, and significant features. Indicate whether the property has historic integrity.)

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### Summary Paragraph

Designed by the Office of the Municipal Architect under Nathan C. Wyeth, the Recorder of Deeds building at 515 D Street NW was constructed in 1941-43. It was built as part of the city's long-planned and only partially realized Municipal Center, a complex of city judicial and administrative buildings planned for Judiciary Square and the squares to its immediate south.<sup>1</sup> Construction of the Recorder of Deeds building, along with the now-demolished Library Annex (demolished in 1982 for construction of the Canadian Embassy), followed the 1941 completion of the Municipal Center Administrative building. Like the Municipal Center Administrative building that served as a stylistic model, the Recorder of Deeds building is a limestone-clad Stripped Classical building with Art Moderne decorative features.

The building occupies almost the entirety of its city lot at the northeast intersection of 6<sup>th</sup> and D Streets with sidewalks separating the building from the street. The three-story building fills its rectangular footprint up to the first-story level, but above that it is U-shaped with an open court at the north-center section of the building. Skylights on the roof of the first story provide natural light into the Recorder's Liber Room on the interior. The building features smooth-cut limestone

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<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive history of the planning and development of the Municipal Center see the District of Columbia Municipal Center and Plaza National Register Nomination (2019).

District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds

Washington, D.C.

Name of Property

County and State

ashlar walls with metal windows and doors punched into the walls with minimal decorative detailing. The Classical Greek-inspired ornamentation is reserved for the door surrounds and building cornice. A full penthouse floor, deeply recessed from the cornice line, is not visible from street level. The principal elevation faces south to D Street and a secondary elevation faces west and extends north along 6<sup>th</sup> Street. The east side and north rear elevations are not readily visible from the public rights-of-way and are not architecturally articulated.



Aerial view looking north at Recorder of Deeds building (Peter Sefton, photographer, 2002)

While the exterior of the building presents a rather austere stripped classical style, the interior offers a warm travertine-paneled lobby along with an impressive array of richly painted wall murals and other art. Seven different murals, painted by seven different artists, were commissioned by the Treasury Department Section of Fine Art, to “reflect the contribution of the Negro to the American nation.” These wall murals, covered for protection while the building sits vacant, are an integral and significant aspect of the building’s artistry and history. Despite being vacant, the building retains a high degree of integrity with no additions or alterations of consequence.

### Site

The Recorder of Deeds building is located at the corner of 6<sup>th</sup> and D streets with its principal façade facing south. A wide concrete sidewalk runs along the south D Street façade of the building, while a narrower one, separated from the building by a grassy strip, extends along the 6<sup>th</sup> Street side elevation. The D Street sidewalk has several metal vaults close to the building’s façade, and a call box, light pole, signs, and street trees closer to the curbside. On the west, 6<sup>th</sup> Street side, a grassy strip of land separates the sidewalk from a walled areaway that leads to the basement level of the building. On the north, the Recorder of Deeds building is separated from

District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds

Washington, D.C.

Name of Property

County and State

the adjacent building by a narrow passageway inaccessible to the public. On the east, a driveway which descends below grade with a retaining wall on the east separates the Recorder of Deeds building from another drive and the buildings on the opposite side of the drive. The Recorder of Deeds driveway and retaining wall are included within the lot boundary of the property (Lot 802 Square 0489).

### Exterior Description

The primary façade facing D Street is a smooth-cut limestone-clad ashlar wall surface divided vertically into nine bays and horizontally into three parts. The three-part horizontal division consists of a raised base, a double-story shaft, and a recessed rooftop penthouse above a cornice at the visible roofline. The base of the building features twin entrances located in either end bay with seven single metal windows evenly arranged between them and punched into the smooth limestone walls. The metal windows feature a single casement on-center with long sidelights to either side and three smaller divided lights above and below the central casement. The doors in either end bay are deeply recessed into the limestone wall and are framed by a stylized stone architrave. The architrave consists of  $\frac{3}{4}$ -engaged and reeded stone pilasters supporting a stone frieze carved with acanthus leaves. The side reveals have recessed limestone panels enclosing a small vestibule that leads to pairs of bronze doors with upper and lower glass panes.<sup>2</sup> Both doors have granite sills with that on the east end being almost flush with the sidewalk and that on the south end raised slightly as the street level descends towards the west.

The building name, DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA RECORDER OF DEEDS is incised into the limestone walls with simple lettering, above the windows of the building's base and below a limestone beltcourse separating the base from the building's upper stories (shaft) above. A corner stone naming the funding sources for the building, the members of the Board of Commissioners, the architect, and the date of construction (1941) of the building, is prominently located at the west end of the south façade, clearly visible to passing pedestrians.

The second and third stories, forming the building's shaft, have single windows in each of the nine bays at both stories. The two end bays are wider than the other seven, and windows in the two bays are punched independently into the limestone wall surface, while the seven inside bays are vertically united by recessed spandrels between and below the window openings. The spandrel panels are black serpentine stone.<sup>3</sup> This treatment of double-height recessed bays separated by limestone piers implies a Classical colonnade and is characteristic of the stripped classical style. Like those in the base, the windows in the shaft are metal with central casement openings. The two end windows of the second story, located above the first-story entrance doors, are framed by a narrowly recessed limestone surround giving these windows greater emphasis than the third story windows above. A limestone cornice carved with Classical Greek-inspired decorative leaves caps the roofline and continues around to the west elevation and one-bay deep on the east elevation.

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<sup>2</sup> Although the historic drawings identify the doors as aluminum, they appear to be bronze. The drawings also show etched aluminum transoms above the double doors which currently do not exist. The original aluminum doors and transoms were either replaced, or, more likely, never built as designed.

<sup>3</sup> The 1941 elevation drawing notes "All Spandrels to be Black Serpentine."

District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds

Washington, D.C.

Name of Property

County and State

The west elevation extends eight bays deep along 6<sup>th</sup> Street with each vertical bay identically arranged. At the base of the building, single metal casements, like those of the façade, are slightly recessed and punched into the walls. Above the limestone beltcourse, the second- and third-story windows are similarly recessed with spandrel panels between the windows with walls to either side, again giving the impression of a colonnade. The cornice of the D Street façade continues to wrap itself around this 6<sup>th</sup> Street elevation. At ground level, an areaway that provides access to the fireproof vault (storeroom) at basement level is separated from the grassy yard by a limestone wall rising approximately four feet above grade.

The east elevation, extending along a driveway, is less highly articulated than the opposing west elevation. The limestone cladding, the beltcourse, the cornice and the serpentine stone spandrels extend from the southeast corner of the building to just beyond the front bay, after which point the wall is clad with buff-colored brick rather than limestone. In addition, the windows are set individually in the wall surface and not arranged within the recessed vertical bays as on the south and west elevations, and the beltcourse and Greek cornice are not carried past the front bay. The metal windows, identical to those elsewhere on the building, feature a central casement and surrounding fixed lights.

The north rear elevation consists of the end walls of the wings forming the U-shaped building and the north end wall of the interior court elevation, all clad in brick. The east and west wing end walls practically abut the building just north of the Recorder of Deeds building and are thus not visible. The north court elevation, as well as the east and west court elevations are visible from the interior of the building at the upper levels. The walls are buff brick and the metal sash with central casements as elsewhere are punched into the brick walls with stone sills.

The penthouse level, set well back from the cornice line above the second story, is not visible, though historic drawings indicate that it is clad in brick. The south elevation has two doors towards either end, while the west elevation has metal casements as elsewhere on the building.

### Interior Description

The interior of the Recorder of Deeds is reached by either of the twin entrances at the east or west ends of the D Street façade. Both entrances have pairs of fully glazed bronze doors on the exterior that open into small vestibules with another pair of glazed bronze doors giving access to larger vestibules. Both vestibules have vertical vein travertine-clad walls and pinkish-hued terrazzo floors with black terrazzo borders. From these vestibules, metal stairs with metal railings lead up to the main lobby. The lobby, clad with a similar vertical vein travertine, spans the south front of the building from east to west and provides access to enclosed staircases (leading down to the storage vault and up to offices), elevator bank, cashier room, delivery room, foyer, and other secondary spaces at the core of the first floor. The liber room, which fills the entire north end of the building from east to west, is reached through the foyer from the lobby.

The lobby, bathed in natural light coming from the seven windows lining the south wall of the room, is a richly detailed space with its travertine walls, terrazzo floor and a coffered plaster ceiling. The travertine walls are laid in large panels and are striated with vertical veins of color ranging from pink to light and darker brown. Around the openings leading to the above-noted

District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds

Washington, D.C.

Name of Property

County and State

spaces, the travertine walls are incised with vertical reeding. A narrow stringcourse caps the height of the openings, but extends around the room, allowing the marble walls above to act as an implied frieze. A series of inset aluminum panels with stylized floral *bas relief* motifs decorate this frieze level, while the coffered ceiling rises above. The beams forming the recessed coffers are decorated with incised reeding matching that found in the marble walls, and visually recalling a classical cornice with alternating metopes and triglyphs. Original signage appears above the doors identifying the Cashier Room, the Liber Room, the Stairs, Elevators and Telephone room. Original light fixtures with fluorescent tube lights are mounted to the ceiling.

The windows along the south wall of the lobby are deeply recessed from the travertine wall surface, but with travertine side walls and sills. The terrazzo floor has a multi-faceted pinkish hue with a black border around the edges. Openings along the north wall of the lobby lead to the former cashier's office, stair well, foyer-then-lobby, elevators, and passage to delivery room. A metal *bas relief* sculpture of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, sculpted by Selma Burke for the Recorder of Deeds building and discussed in Section 8 of this nomination, is built into the lobby's north wall, immediately to the left of the entrance to the stairs, and to the right of the passageway leading to the cashier's room.

Three broad openings, on-center of the lobby's north wall and separated by travertine-clad piers lead to the travertine-clad foyer and then into the liber room. The walls of the foyer decorated with four of the seven wall murals that were commissioned for the space. These murals are currently encased in protective coverings for conservation as the building is vacant and is unconditioned. The murals, commissioned by the Treasury Department Section of Fine Art and placed in the building in 1943, are set into recessed plaster beds designed and built for the murals.



Photo of foyer from lobby showing murals before being covered (Peter Sefton, photographer, 2002)

District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds  
Name of Property

Washington, D.C.  
County and State

The liber room, historically accommodating shelves of deed books, no longer holds the books, though the movable wooden shelves are still intact. The room fills the entire north end of the building with windows on the east and west end walls, no windows on the north wall, and laylights in the ceiling above. The liber room floor is covered with vinyl tiles over a concrete slab.

The second floor of the Recorder of Deeds, U-shaped in plan with an open court over the liber room, includes the Office of the Recorder, the library and other private offices. The second floor is reached by either the stairs or elevators. The quarter-turn metal stairs ascend and descend all levels of the building and include metal railings with plain metal balusters, newel, and metal handrails; the metal steps are capped with black terrazzo treads. The partition walls in the second floor are metal, painted to look like wood.

The Recorder's office is located in the southwest corner and the library is in the northwest corner of the second floor. Corridors run along the U-shaped floor plan providing access to and between offices, the stairs and elevators and bathroom facilities. In the east and west wings, the corridors are double loaded with offices on either side. Those offices on the outside wall have windows to the street, while those on the inside wall have windows into the open court.

The Recorder's Office has windows on the south and west sides and doors on the north and east sides leading to private offices and the corridor. The faux wood metal walls of the Recorder's Office include a chair rail and coved crown molding with corbelled bed molding surrounding the room, and oak floors laid in a tapestry pattern. The ceiling is finished with plaster. A painting depicting the groundbreaking ceremony of 1943 and known as "Groundbreaking Day" hung on the north interior partition wall of the Recorder's Office until the building was vacated.



Photo of Recorder of Deed's office showing "Groundbreaking Day" painting (Peter Sefton, photographer, 2002)

District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds  
Name of Property

Washington, D.C.  
County and State

The library, larger than the Recorder's Office, occupies the entire north end of the west wing. The west wing corridor leads past offices and then directly into the room. The room has windows on its west wall looking onto D Street and windows on the east wall looking into the court and the laylights covering the liber room. A fireplace with a stone surround and stone hearth is located on-center of the north wall, opposite the entrance door. The library walls consist of metal partitions with oak veneer as elsewhere, and the concrete floors are covered with non-original vinyl tiles. Built-in bookshelves flank the fireplace, above which sits the seventh mural, covered for conservation purposes. Part of the ceiling is plaster and the other part is dropped acoustical tile.



Photo of library before mural was covered and building was vacated (Peter Sefton, photographer, 2002)

All of the walls in the upper floor offices and corridors have fireproof metal partitions with those in the offices finished with a wood veneer giving the impression that they are wood and those in corridors largely painted white. The corridors have ceramic water fountains recessed into the metal walls, terrazzo flooring, and dropped acoustical tile ceilings. Doors leading between offices, or between the corridor and offices are all metal. The restrooms are intact with terrazzo floors and marble stall dividers.

The third floor has a similar arrangement of offices on either side of the U-shaped corridor with the service facilities at the core of the building. The third floor housed the index room and title rooms, and offices for copyists and other clerical staff. The penthouse level historically housed a cafeteria and kitchen, in addition to machine rooms and other facility rooms.

District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds  
Name of Property

Washington, D.C.  
County and State

The building also includes a basement, intended to hold original deeds in a fireproof storage area.

### **INTEGRITY**

The Recorder of Deeds building has high integrity. It is at its original location at the corner of 6<sup>th</sup> and D Streets NW in the Judiciary Square area and stylistically related to the Municipal Center building. The setting, though a changing urban landscape, retains much of its historic character, including most notably, the early 19<sup>th</sup>-century City Hall (now DC Court) designed by George Hadfield and forming the southern end of Judiciary Square proper. Two 19<sup>th</sup>-century residential buildings are located immediately east of the Recorder of Deeds building, remnants illustrating the historic, mixed-use residential and governmental aspect of the square. The building retains integrity of design, materials and workmanship with original materials intact on both the exterior and interior. The building, which served as the Office of the Recorder of Deeds from its completion in 1943 until 2008, is currently vacant, but with the building name incised on the exterior, and its public art on the interior, commissioned specifically for the building, the building retains a high degree of feeling and association.



District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds  
Name of Property

Washington, D.C.  
County and State

## 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 patterns of our history.
- B. Property is 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.)

- 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 old or achieving significance within the past 50 years

District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds  
Name of Property

Washington, D.C.  
County and State

**Areas of Significance**

(Enter categories from instructions.)

ARCHITECTURE

POLITICS/GOVERNMENT

ETHNIC HERITAGE/Black

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Period of Significance**

1943-1945

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Significant Dates**

1943; 1945

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Significant Person**

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Cultural Affiliation**

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Architect/Builder**

Nathan Wyeth, Municipal Architect

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds

Washington, D.C.

Name of Property

County and State

**Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph** (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance, applicable criteria, justification for the period of significance, and any applicable criteria considerations.)

The Recorder of Deeds building, constructed 1941-43, is the first and only purpose-built building to house the city's Office of the Recorder of Deeds. The position of Recorder of Deeds dates to 1863 when Congress created it, but was formalized in 1869, when Congress detailed the functions of the position and instituted a fee system to support a recorder's office and staff. As stipulated by Congress, the position of the Recorder of Deeds was to be appointed by the president and subject to Senate confirmation in the manner of a cabinet-level appointment.

For decades, the recorder's office occupied rooms in the Old City Hall building and nearby rented space. From the outset, recorders lobbied for a consolidated and fireproof space—a plea that finally succeeded in 1940, when President Franklin Roosevelt signed a bill allowing the District to receive a Public Works Administration loan to fund a recorder's building. Two months later, the president attended a ground-breaking ceremony, though designs for the building were not completed until early 1941 and construction was not completed until 1943 due to World War II budget and material shortages.

Designed by the Municipal Architect's Office under Nathan C. Wyeth, the Recorder of Deeds building was constructed as part of the city's long-planned and only partially realized "Municipal Center," a complex of city judicial and administrative buildings planned for Judiciary Square and the squares to its immediate south. As constructed, the limestone-clad building reflected a stripped classical style consistent with the other buildings making up the Municipal Center.

As stipulated by Congress, the position of Recorder of Deeds was a presidential appointment. In 1881 President James Garfield appointed Frederick Douglass to the position of Recorder of Deeds, the first African American to hold the position. Douglass was succeeded by James C. Matthews, an African American lawyer and New York Democrat. The appointments of Douglass and Matthews thus established a tradition whereby the president appointed African Americans to the prestigious and highly remunerated position.

As constructed, the Recorder of Deeds building includes an important public art program that commemorates African American history. Seven murals painted by seven different artists commissioned by the Treasury Department Section of Fine Art depict historical events in which African Americans played critical and heroic roles. Two of the seven murals, "Frederick Douglass Imploring President Lincoln" and "Benjamin Banneker and the District of Columbia" are specifically associated with the District, while the others depict African Americans in national patriotic struggles outside the District.

In addition to the murals, the building includes a bronze plaque, "The Four Freedoms," with a relief depicting President Roosevelt in profile. The plaque, sculpted by African American sculptor Dr. Selma Burke, was commissioned for the building before Roosevelt's death and dedicated in 1945, after his death.

District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds

Washington, D.C.

Name of Property

County and State

The Recorder of Deeds Building meets National Register Criteria A and C at the local level of significance. The building meets Criterion A with Politics/Government and Ethnic Heritage/Black as the Areas of Significance for its association with the appointments of African Americans to the position of Recorder. The position is a symbol of national achievement of African Americans, while it simultaneously represents the African American struggle for equal rights. Similarly, the building's art program, which is integral to the building, celebrates this achievement and the contributions of African Americans to the nation.

The Recorder of Deeds building meets National Register Criterion C with Architecture as the Area of Significance as the building embodies the distinguishing characteristics of Art Moderne Stripped Classical style and is an expression of urban planning and design. Namely, the building was built as part of the Municipal Center and designed in a style complementary to the other buildings making up the complex. The inclusion of the Recorder of Deeds building within the complex represents the recognized importance of the Office to the development of the city.

The building further meets Criterion C because its interior wall murals possess high artistic value and are notable works of recognized artists associated with the New Deal-era public arts programs. In addition to their merits as individual works, the murals represent a significant and distinguishable entity as a thematic group. The art program includes the sculptural relief "Four Freedoms" by the distinguished African American artist Selma Burke.

The Period of Significance for the Recorder of Deeds extends from 1943 when the building was completed to 1945 when the "The Four Freedoms" plaque was dedicated for the interior.

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**Narrative Statement of Significance** (Provide at least **one** paragraph for each area of significance.)

### **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, however, the Recorder of Deeds of the District of Columbia became one of only 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>4</sup> In 1869 to resolve lingering questions about the recorder's authority to issue titles to property,

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<sup>4</sup> "Real Estate Changes," *Washington Post*, November 11, 1889, 7.

District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds

Washington, D.C.

Name of Property

County and State

Congress further formalized the functions of the position, and also instituted a fee system to fully support a recorder's office and staff.

Although many states, counties, and municipalities instituted offices with similar functions, the District of Columbia's position of Recorder of Deeds was unique. Congress made the position a presidential appointment, 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. Nominees often lacked connections to the District and its residents that the office served. Indeed, the recorder position was a patronage plum, highly lucrative and highly coveted. In addition to fees for certification and other services, the office hand copied 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 noted that commercial activity increased so much that the Recorder of Deeds had become the most highly compensated government official after the President.<sup>5</sup>

Douglass, the first African American recorder, was not the first African American to work in the office. His predecessor, General George A. Sheridan of Louisiana, had hired copyist Henrietta Vinton Davis (1860-1941) as the office's first African American employee in 1878.<sup>6</sup> Three years later, Douglass was named Recorder in 1881 and held the position through the administration of Chester Alan Arthur, who became president upon Garfield's assassination, and into the first year of Cleveland's presidency. 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 he had nominated Matthews because he "desired in this way to tender just recognition and good faith toward our colored fellow citizens."<sup>7</sup> Some of Matthews' critics argued that the office should be reserved for a city resident, most particularly long-time Deputy Recorder Colonel George F. Schayer who was white. Hostility extended to Douglass as well, though he was a D.C. resident and had achieved national stature and 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>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (Mineola, NY: Courier Dover Press, 1892; reprinted (2003), 387.

<sup>6</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>7</sup> "Matthews Rejection," *Washington Post*, February 8, 1886, 1.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds

Washington, D.C.

Name of Property

County and State

The news columns of the *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." The March 7, 1886 issue of the *Washington Post* fired a double-barreled barrage against Douglass and Matthews, reprinting a *Chicago News* article headlined "Fred Douglass Calls Himself a Caucasian," and publishing an editorial piece protesting Cleveland's nomination of a "non-District man." Clearly, the objection had more to do with his race than his residency:

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 Office of the Recorder of Deeds, and Schayer's resignation was sought and accepted within days.<sup>9</sup>

The Douglass-Matthews affair defined the Recorder position in ways that endured for decades. First, it established an unwritten tradition 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 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>10</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.

Still, the *Post* persisted in its discriminatory tone. It greeted Theodore Roosevelt's 1904 nomination of John Dancy 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:

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<sup>9</sup> "In Their New Offices," *Washington Post*, August 11, 1886, 2.

<sup>10</sup> "Recordership of Deeds," *Washington Post*, April 3, 1894, 4.

District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds

Washington, D.C.

Name of Property

County and State

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.

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 Dancy 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>11</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 whites for local office.<sup>12</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>13</sup> Costello, the first white recorder since before Frederick Douglass' appointment in 1881, served from 1916 until 1922, when Republican Warren G. Harding replaced him with African-American lawyer Arthur Froe.<sup>14</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>15</sup> The selection

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<sup>11</sup> "Real Estate Changes," 7.

<sup>12</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. 12. A number of southern congressmen attended these meetings and support was said to be offered by Senator Vardaman of Mississippi.

<sup>13</sup> "Costello As Recorder," *Washington Post*, June 9, 1916, 12. Henry Johnson, his predecessor resigned on June 30, 1913.

<sup>14</sup> "Arthur Froe, Colored Lawyer, Takes Oath of Office," *Washington Post*, March 2, 1922, 4.

<sup>15</sup> "Colored Citizens Protest," *Washington Post*, March 26, 1897, 3.

District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds

Washington, D.C.

Name of Property

County and State

of new recorders was covered in detail by such national African American newspapers as the *Chicago Defender*.

### **Advocating for a Recorder of Deeds Building:**

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 to the new District Building and Old City Hall became the District Courthouse. However, the recorder's office stayed at Judiciary Square for its proximity to the courthouse.

In 1878, Recorder Simon Wolf first called attention to the lack of fireproof storage for irreplaceable land records.<sup>16</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. A fire threatened the copying room in 1901, and recorders continued to lobby for a consolidated and secure space.<sup>17</sup> However, until the New Deal, the District Commissioners and Congress disregarded these requests.

Dr. William J. Thompkins, recorder from 1934 to 1944, succeeded in translating pleas for a secure building with fireproof vaults into concrete, steel, and limestone. A hospital superintendent from Kansas City, Missouri, Dr. Thompkins 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, Thompkins was one of six members of the African American committee of the Democratic National Committee in 1936 and 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 January 1, 1940 and his face is painted into the mural of Marian Anderson's 1930 Lincoln Memorial concert at the Department of the Interior building.

Dr. Thompkins 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. Thompkins created a press flurry by suggesting that property owners should 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

<sup>16</sup> "The Interest of Citizens," *Washington Post*, January 28, 1878, 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.

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



District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds

Washington, D.C.

Name of Property

County and State

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 allocating \$500,000 in Public Works Administration loan funds for a Recorder of Deeds building was signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt.<sup>21</sup>

### **The Municipal Center and the Recorder of Deeds**

Plagued by the inefficiencies inherent in having offices scattered throughout the city, the federal government centralized its functions at the Federal Triangle whose buildings were constructed between 1926 and 1937. The advantages of this concept were apparent to the District government whose own functions were split between Judiciary Square and the District Building on Pennsylvania Avenue. A plan to consolidate D.C. government offices in a complex of municipal buildings at Judiciary Square gained traction under the New Deal public works programs. Known as the Municipal Center, the proposed plan for the complex would be arranged with the District of Columbia Courthouse (original City Hall, 1820) as the centerpiece. The Administrative Building at 300 Indiana Avenue NW, now known as the Municipal Center building (1941), was the first new building in the complex to be constructed; it was designed in a stripped classical style that distinguished itself from but harmonized with the Greek Revival-style Old City Hall building on the square. Although the Recorder of Deeds was not initially slated for the complex, it was built as part of it, along with the D.C. Library Annex at 499 Pennsylvania Avenue (now demolished), both of which were executed in a stripped classical aesthetic echoing that of the Municipal Center building.

The Office of the Municipal Architect under Nathan Wyeth prepared plans for the Recorder of Deeds building in 1940. Wyeth had been fully engaged in the design of the Municipal Center as a private practitioner under Albert Harris, a role he continued after being named Municipal Architect in 1934. Under his leadership, the Municipal Center's design underwent many changes due to a different aesthetic approach, repeated funding delays, and as new municipal functions, such as the Recorder of Deeds office, were proposed to be included within the center's boundaries. In 1952 Wyeth noted that five or six of the fifteen or twenty architects working under him concentrated on the Municipal Center's design, and he credited one of those team members, architect Jessie Ivey Cuthriell, as the principal architect of the Recorder of Deeds building.<sup>22</sup>

The public relations ministrations of Doctor Thompkins gave the Recorder of Deeds building project a high-profile launch. On September 26, 1940, just two months after the signing of the funding bill, Dr. Thompkins 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. Thompkins' "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

<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> Pam Scott, "Nathan Corwith Wyeth (1870-1963)," Historic Preservation Office.

District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds

Washington, D.C.

Name of Property

County and State

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>23</sup>

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>24</sup>

On April 25, 1941, about eight months after the groundbreaking, Dr. Thompkins 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.<sup>25</sup> Dr. Thompkins predicted that the building would be ready by early 1942, but materials were in short supply and on October 14, 1941, it was reported that construction had halted for lack of steel window frames.<sup>26</sup> The Central Library, however, was in an even more dire predicament; although ground had been broken around the same time as the Recorder of Deeds, the library’s site remained an empty pit because structural steel was unavailable.<sup>27</sup>

### Symbolism and Art in the Recorder of Deeds

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 Recorder of Deeds building within the proposed Municipal Center complex in the same architectural style as the Municipal Center was a powerful statement of inclusion. At the same time, the internal art program of the building was a symbolic validation of the importance of the contributions of African Americans to the city and nation. The program of art in the Office of the Recorder of Deeds predates the building itself. In 1936, Dr. Thompkins 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

<sup>23</sup> “Roosevelt to Talk,” *Washington Post*, September 25, 1940, 16 and “Ground Broken for Hall of Records,” *Washington Post*, September 27, 1940, 1.

<sup>24</sup> “Tie-up of Channel Project Threatened,” *Washington Post*, October 5, 1940, 1.

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

<sup>26</sup> “D.C. Heads Will Act to Free Projects,” *Washington Post*, October 14, 1941, 3.

<sup>27</sup> After Pearl Harbor, the library was allocated a low construction priority rating; 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 office space for the city Library Board. In 1971, the Mies van Rohe-designed building now known as the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Library opened at 9<sup>th</sup> and G streets, NW, and the Library Annex became surplus space. It was demolished in 1982 to make way for the Canadian Embassy.

District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds

Washington, D.C.

Name of Property

County and State

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. Allan Page Flavelle (1907-1995) was a Syracuse University graduate who executed other WPA commissions in Washington as well as his native Oregon.<sup>28</sup>

The portraits were presented at a ceremony in the Recorder's Office at 412 D Street NW, where 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. Thompkins 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>29</sup> The ensemble was said to be the only collection of portraits of African Americans in any federally controlled office space.

The District of Columbia's peculiar sovereignty status required that the federal government approve construction of the Recorder of Deeds building, 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: Edward Bruce, Edward B. Rowan and Forbes Watson. 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>30</sup> Assistant Director Edward B. Rowan was a painter of regional note and founder of the innovative Little Gallery in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Another member of the team, Forbes Watson was a New York City art critic and journalist.<sup>31</sup> When the PWAP fell victim to budget cuts after only six months of operation, Bruce and his team then moved to the Treasury Department. The Office of the Supervisory Architect within the Treasury Department (where Municipal Architect 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>32</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 could produce work of the required quality,

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<sup>28</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.

<sup>29</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>30</sup> Belisario Contreras. *Tradition and Innovation in New Deal Art*. (Lewisburg, Pa: Bucknell University Press, 1983), 31-37.

<sup>31</sup> Richard McKinzie. *The New Deal for Artists* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 12.

<sup>32</sup> Jonathan Harris. *Federal Art and National Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 24.

District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds

Washington, D.C.

Name of Property

County and State

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>33</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>34</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>35</sup> After the start of World War II, the perception that public art was not essential to the war effort gained traction. 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 Recorder of Deed building mural competition was in progress. The Treasury Section officially expired with its funding on June 30, 1943, but Edward Rowan oversaw the Recorder of Deed mural 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 Recorder of Deed building mural competition was a ten-page document that required artists to submit their entries unsigned for anonymous judging.<sup>36</sup> Mural subjects had been "carefully worked out by the Recorder...following intensive research." Dr. Thompkins had determined that "in view of the history of the office of the Recorder of Deeds... 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 Benjamin Banneker and Mayor Ellicott presenting the plans of the District of Columbia to the President, [and] Mr. Thomas Jefferson in the presence of Benjamin Franklin and Alexander Hamilton.

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. Thompkins, Edward Rowan, and Nan Watson, a painter married to Forbes Watson, made final selections from 167 sketches by 127 artists.<sup>37</sup> A press release announced that the winners' wide geographic dispersion and almost equal female-male ratio, as well as the inclusion

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<sup>33</sup> Mckinzie, 37-38.

<sup>34</sup> Conteras, p. 102.

<sup>35</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>36</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.

<sup>37</sup> "Jury Selecting Murals, *Washington Post*, April 3, 1943, B1.

District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds

Washington, D.C.

Name of Property

County and State

of accomplished African American painter William Edouard Scott, proved the fairness of the blind selection process.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, many of the artists selected had already painted murals for public buildings and had distinguished careers in the arts.

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>39</sup> Dr. Thompkins, federal arts administrators and artists interacted to produce distinctive murals, as illustrated by the commission “Courageous Act of Cyrus Tiffany at the Battle of Lake Erie” by 24-year-old Martyl Schweig. After Schweig submitted several competition entries for the Recorder of Deeds building, 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 itself. Schweig’s composition showed Perry holding his sword in his left hand. Rowan’s notification letter asked whether Perry had actually been left-handed, because “otherwise it raises too many questions.”<sup>40</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>41</sup> On June 14, 1943, Schweig reported that a famous statue in Philadelphia showed Perry holding his sword in his left hand and stated that he had been ambidextrous.<sup>42</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. Thompkins’ 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>43</sup> A criticism of her preliminary cartoon voiced by Dr. Thompkins 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

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<sup>38</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>39</sup> Marling, 48-49.

<sup>40</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>41</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>42</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>43</sup> Edward Rowan to Martyl Schweig. Unpublished Letter of April 5, 1943. Smithsonian Institution Archive of American Art. Martyl Schweig Langsdorf Papers, Box 1.

District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds

Washington, D.C.

Name of Property

County and State

background to enhance the sense of danger.<sup>44</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 somewhat more pleasing and appealing character. The painting is going into a building under the management of members of the Colored race and it is essential that no objection is raised to the treatment of a Negro...<sup>45</sup>

By October, further revisions had restored good relations, and Rowan congratulated Schweig 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>46</sup> However, Schweig 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. Schweig’s completed mural was not received until January 22, 1944, and she was forced to pay Crittenden’s additional expenses. A consequence of her tardiness was that the public unveiling of the murals was postponed permanently. Dr. Thompkins, 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. Edward Rowan might have intended to hold an unveiling in Dr. Thompkins’ memory when wartime travel restrictions were lifted, but he died in 1946 and neither a publicized unveiling nor a building dedication was ever held.

### **The Murals in an Artistic Context**

The Recorder of Deed building murals were created at the end of the golden age of mural painting internationally. 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 Recorder of Deed 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 and landscapes. Only two of the Recorder of Deed mural subjects, “Frederick Douglass Imploring President Lincoln” and “Benjamin Banneker and the District of Columbia” have direct associations with the District.

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<sup>44</sup> William J. Thompkins, 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.

<sup>45</sup> Edward Rowan to Martyl Schweig. Unpublished Letter of July 27, 1943. Smithsonian Institution Archive of American Art. Martyl Schweig Langsdorf Papers, Box 1.

<sup>46</sup> Edward Rowan to Martyl Schweig. Unpublished Letter of October 14, 1943. Smithsonian Institution Archive of American Art. Martyl Schweig Langsdorf Papers, Box 1.

District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds

Name of Property

Washington, D.C.

County and State

The murals at many Federal Triangle buildings illustrate the agency's goals and programs. However, none of the Recorder of Deeds building murals illustrates the Office of the Recorder's functions. Although Dr. Thompkins' 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.

The Recorder of Deeds building murals express a unique thematic program and 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 Herschel Levit'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 muralists achieved the fame of Benton, Kent, or Marsh, each was an accomplished artist whose body of work has achieved recognition. And, all of the murals 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 of art were commissioned for the Recorder of Deeds building: "The Four Freedoms," "Groundbreaking Day," and a plaster cast of Abraham Lincoln. "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>47</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

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<sup>47</sup> "Sculptor Selma Burke," *Washington Post*, March 17, 1975. B1 presents Burke's account without qualification or acknowledgement of the controversy.

District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds

Washington, D.C.

Name of Property

County and State

Commission on Fine Arts. In any case, newspapers later reported that the plaque had been created for the Recorder of Deeds building.

Burke had two sittings to sketch the President, the first of which reportedly took place in January 1943, simultaneous to the mural competition.<sup>48</sup> In March 1945, Eleanor Roosevelt visited Burke's New York studio to view the final drawing and found some details unsatisfactory.<sup>49</sup> Burke was offered a third sitting with Roosevelt at the next month's United Nations Conference in San Francisco, but Roosevelt died on its eve. Burke quickly finished her relief, which was exhibited at a New York gallery in July 1945.

"The Four Freedoms" plaque was dedicated at the Recorder of Deeds building on September 24, 1945; it was a memorial ceremony to Roosevelt with 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. Thompkins and reported that the installation of the plaque was the realization of one of the late doctor's dreams.<sup>50</sup> Ms. Burke's sculpture, which sought to capture Roosevelt's essence as a "young Roman gladiator," has been widely reproduced and has become iconic.<sup>51</sup> In later life, she became a noted teacher of sculpture whose accomplishments were recognized by a Pennsylvania state proclamation and major exhibit at the Lyndon Baines Johnson Museum.

William Edouard Scott's "Groundbreaking Day" (1944) is an oil painting on canvas commemorating the 1940 ceremony. The painting, which hung in the Recorder's Office, but is now in storage off-site, shows Dr. Thompkins and President Roosevelt in the foreground. The painting has been criticized for depicting other African American attendees in the shadows, while more prominently depicting several white dignitaries who were not actually present.



<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</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>50</sup> "Truman Praises Roosevelt Ideals," *Washington Post*, September 25, 1945, 1.

<sup>51</sup> Van Ryzin, 202.



District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds  
Name of Property

Washington, D.C.  
County and State

A plaster cast of a statue of a young shirtless Abraham Lincoln once at the Recorder of Deeds building is no longer *in situ*. The cast is a replica of a circa 1940 statue in the Los Angeles Federal Building by James Lee Hansen and apparently commemorates the inauguration of the recorder position during Lincoln's administration.

### **Epilogue**

The Recorder of Deeds building housed the Office of the Recorder of Deeds for more than sixty years from its opening in 1943 to 2008, when it moved. Since 2008, the building has been vacant and although the murals have been covered for protection, the building is unconditioned and the future of the murals, uncertain. The building, including selective interior spaces, the seven wall murals and "The Four Freedoms" plaque were designated a DC Historic Landmark in December 2019.

District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds

Name of Property

Washington, D.C.

County and State

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## 9. Major Bibliographical References

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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

District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds  
Name of Property

Washington, D.C.  
County and State

**Previous documentation on file (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 # \_\_\_\_\_
- recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # \_\_\_\_\_

**Primary location of additional data:**

- State Historic Preservation Office
  - Other State agency
  - Federal agency
  - Local government
  - University
  - Other
- Name of repository: \_\_\_\_\_

**Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned):** \_\_\_\_\_

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**10. Geographical Data**

**Acreeage of Property** .28 acres

Use either the UTM system or latitude/longitude coordinates

**Latitude/Longitude Coordinates**

Datum if other than WGS84: \_\_\_\_\_

(enter coordinates to 6 decimal places)

- |                        |                       |
|------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Latitude: 38.895034 | Longitude: -77.019504 |
| 2. Latitude:           | Longitude:            |
| 3. Latitude:           | Longitude:            |
| 4. Latitude:           | Longitude:            |

**Or**

**UTM References**

Datum (indicated on USGS map):

NAD 1927 or  NAD 1983

District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds  
Name of Property

Washington, D.C.  
County and State

- |          |           |           |
|----------|-----------|-----------|
| 1. Zone: | Easting:  | Northing: |
| 2. Zone: | Easting:  | Northing: |
| 3. Zone: | Easting:  | Northing: |
| 4. Zone: | Easting : | Northing: |

**Verbal Boundary Description** (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

The Recorder of Deeds building at 515 D Street NW occupies Lot 802 in Square 0489 in the District of Columbia.

**Boundary Justification** (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

The Recorder of Deeds building has been associated with this lot and its boundaries since construction of the building 1941-43.

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**11. Form Prepared By**

name/title: D.P. Sefton, Architectural Historian  
organization: DC Preservation League  
street & number: 1221 Connecticut Avenue NW  
city or town: Washington, D.C. state: \_\_\_\_\_ zip code: 20036  
e-mail info@dcpreservation.org  
telephone: 202 783-5144  
date: February 2020

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**Additional Documentation**

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A **USGS map** or equivalent (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
- **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map.
- **Additional items:** (Check with the SHPO, TPO, or FPO for any additional items.)

District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds  
Name of Property

Washington, D.C.  
County and State

### Photographs

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels (minimum), 3000x2000 preferred, at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map. Each photograph must be numbered and that number must correspond to the photograph number on the photo log. For simplicity, the name of the photographer, photo date, etc. may be listed once on the photograph log and doesn't need to be labeled on every photograph.

### Photo Log

Name of Property: Recorder of Deeds

City or Vicinity: Washington, D.C.

County:

State: DC

Photographer: Kim Williams

Date Photographed: February 2020

Description of Photograph(s) and number, include description of view indicating direction of camera:

General view looking northeast showing south and west elevations

1 of 23

View looking southeasterly showing west elevation

2 of 23

View looking northeast from corner of 6<sup>th</sup> and D streets

3 of 23

View looking east showing north elevation of building abutting passageway between the Recorder of Deeds and adjacent building to the north

4 of 23

View looking west showing south and (part of ) east elevations

5 of 23

View looking north showing drive and east elevation

6 of 23

View looking west (skyward) showing east elevation at end of first bay where stone meets brick walls

7 of 23

View looking north showing east elevation

8 of 23

District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds

Washington, D.C.

Name of Property

County and State

View of entrance door at east end of south façade  
9 of 23

View looking east (skyward) showing windows and cornice detail on west elevation  
10 of 23

View of cornerstone at southwest corner of building at 6<sup>th</sup> and D streets  
11 of 23

Interior view from west entry vestibule looking east to lobby  
12 of 23

Interior view looking west from middle of lobby  
13 of 23

Interior view looking southwest from middle of lobby  
14 of 23

Interior view looking from lobby to elevator bank on north lobby wall  
15 of 23

Interior view looking northwest from lobby to foyer with Liber Room beyond (note wall murals covered for conservation)  
16 of 23

Interior view looking northeast from lobby to foyer  
17 of 23

Interior view looking north into stairwell from lobby  
18 of 23

Interior view of Liber Room looking east  
19 of 23

Interior view of Recorder's Office looking west  
20 of 23

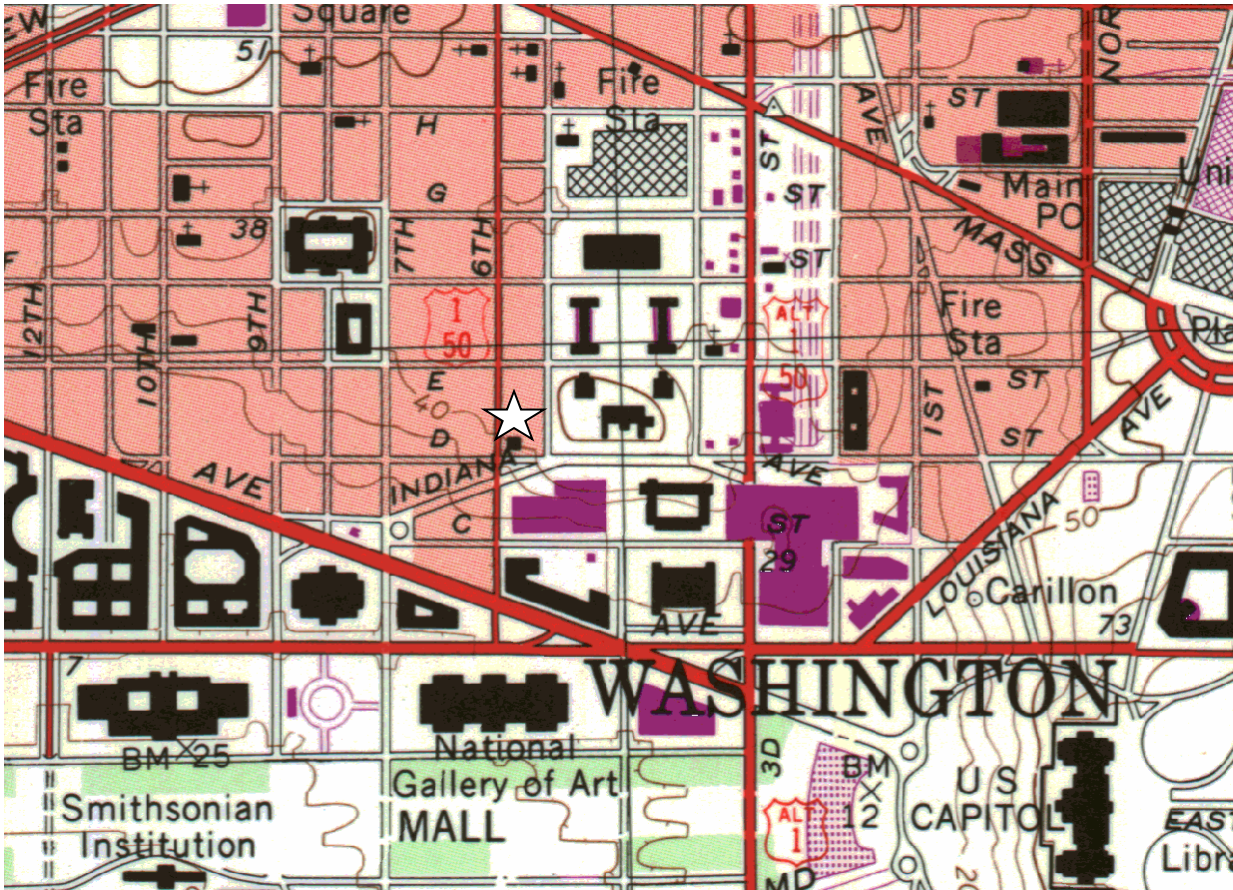
Interior view of Library looking northwest with fireplace on north end wall  
21 of 23

Detail of "Four Freedoms" Sculpture of Franklin Delano Roosevelt  
22 of 23

View of bronze door between entrance and vestibule  
22 of 23

District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds  
Name of Property

Washington, D.C.  
County and State

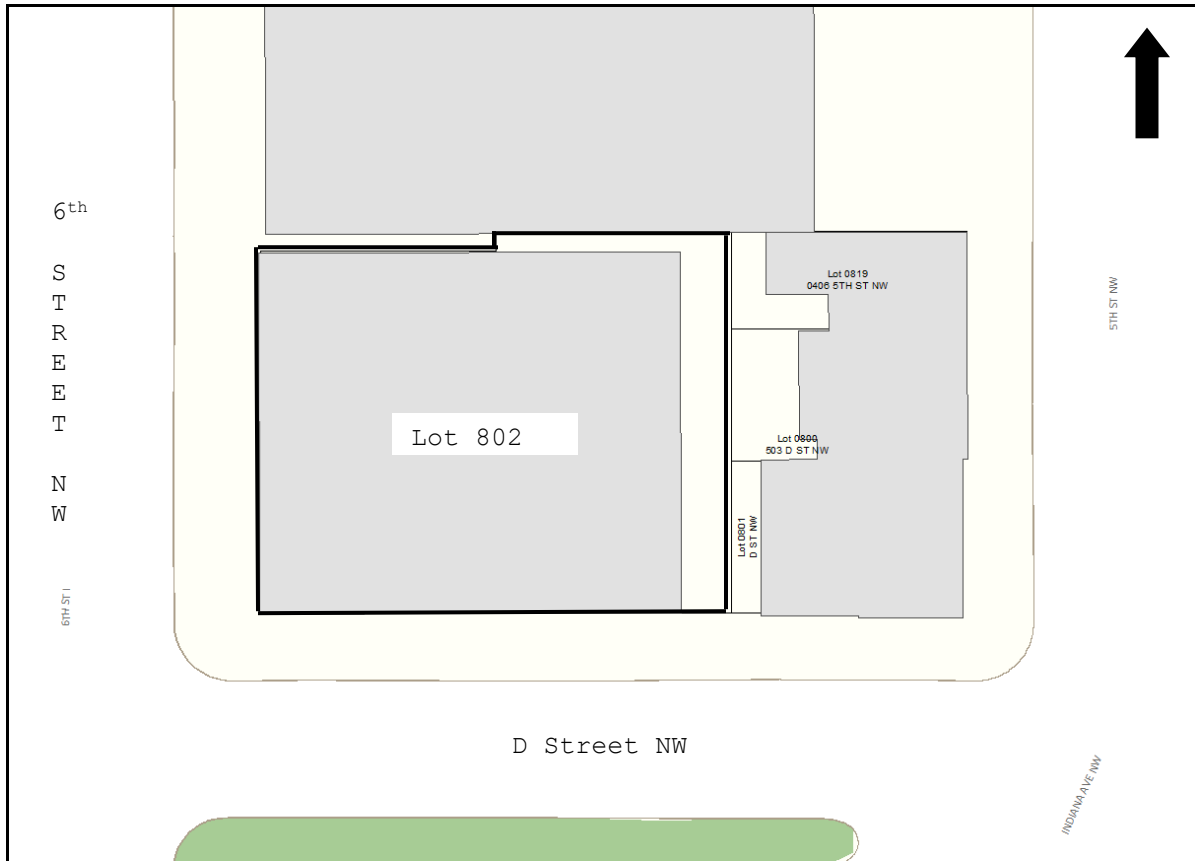


Site Map showing Recorder of Deeds building 515 D Street, NW  
(USGS Quad Washington West)

Latitude: 38.895034      Longitude: -77.019504

District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds  
Name of Property

Washington, D.C.  
County and State

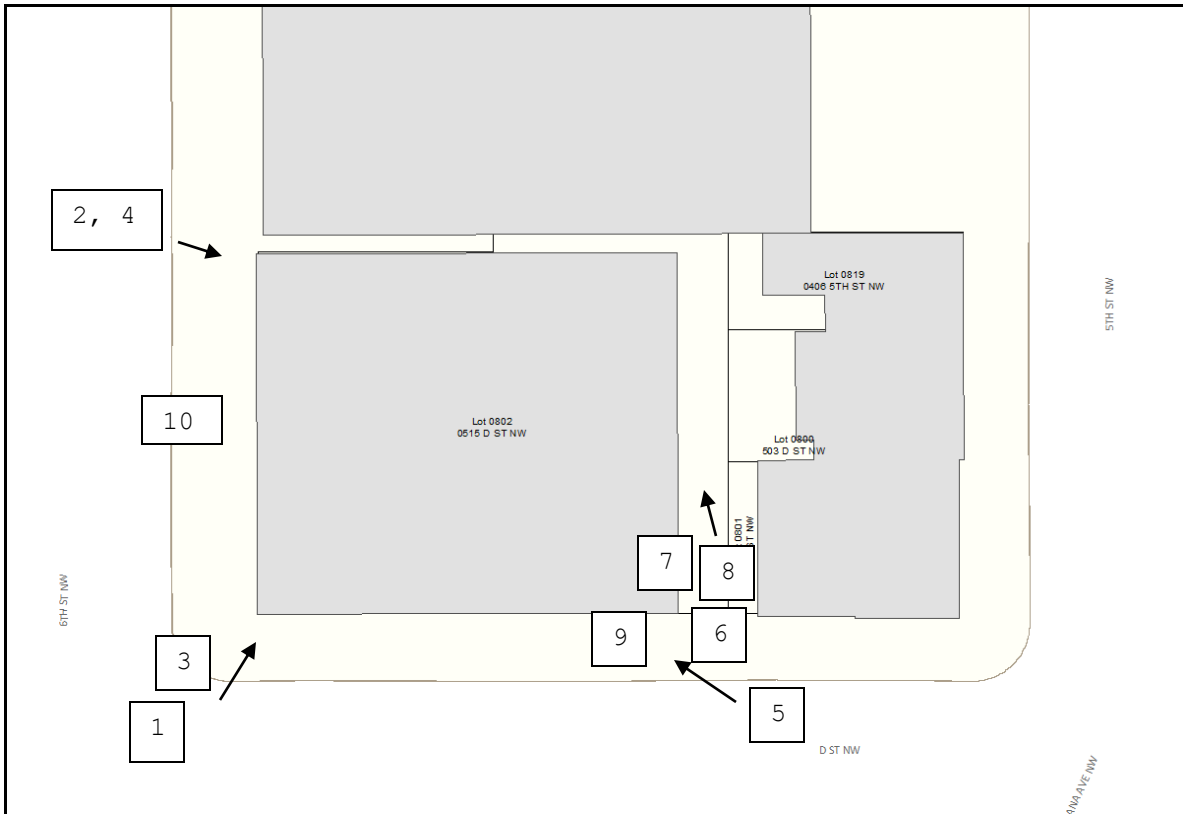


Site Map showing National Register Boundary of Recorder of Deeds building  
Square 0489 Lot 802



District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds  
Name of Property \_\_\_\_\_

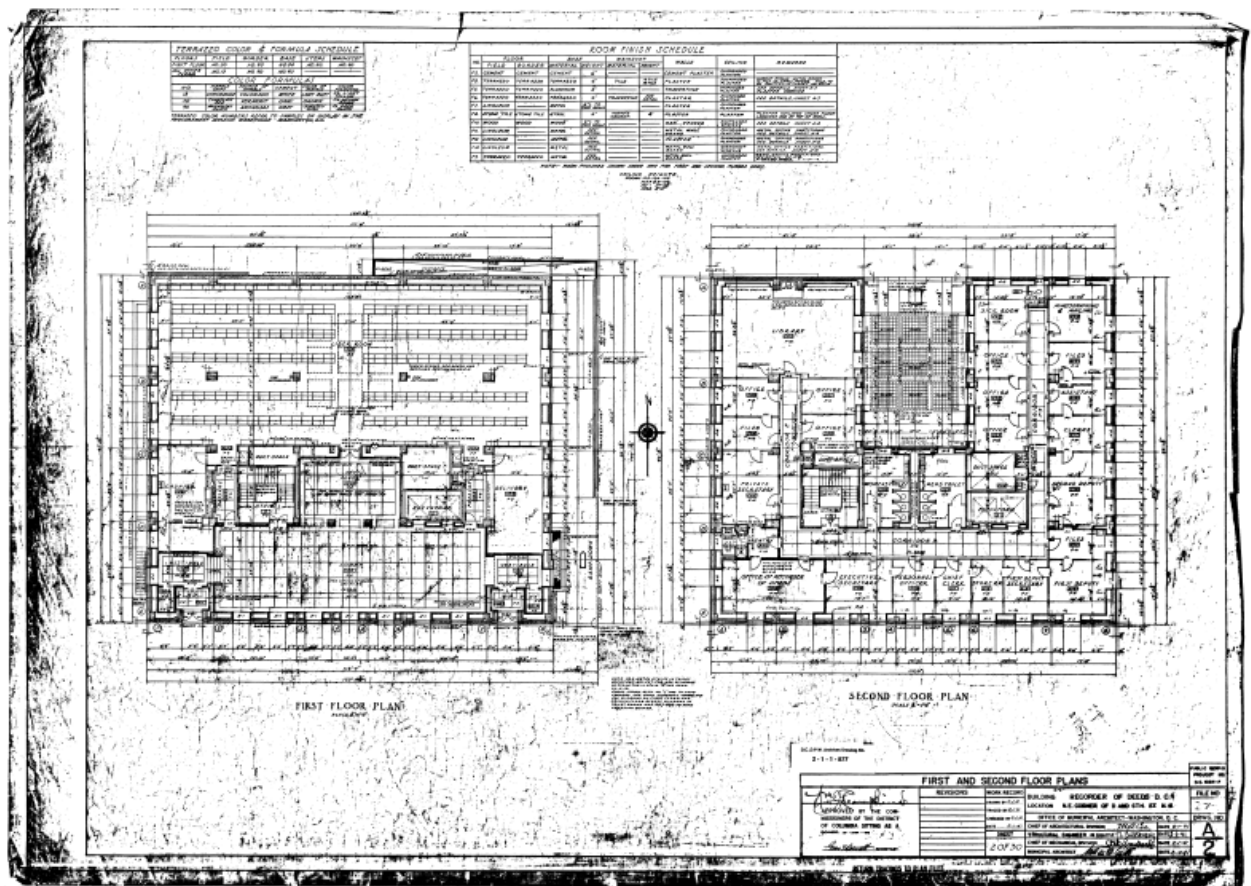
Washington, D.C.  
County and State \_\_\_\_\_



Key to Photographs

District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds  
Name of Property

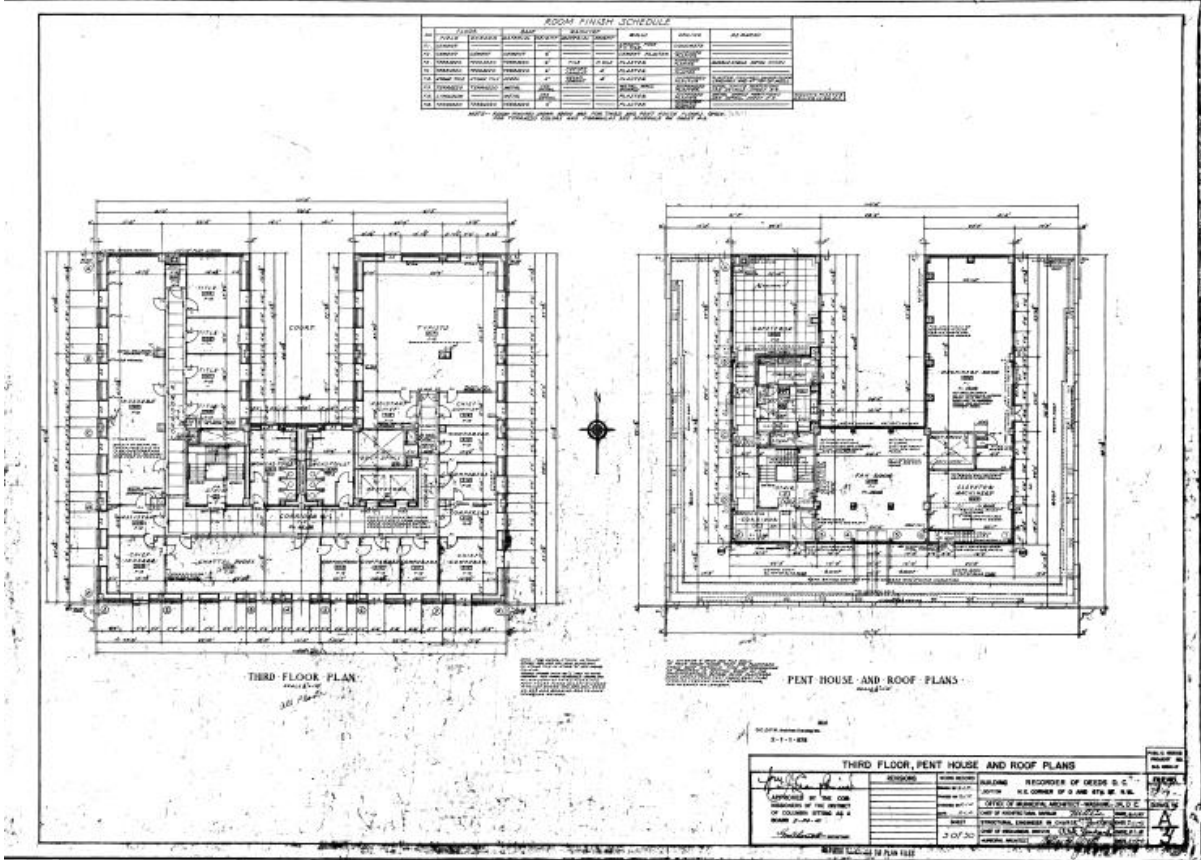
Washington, D.C.  
County and State



First and Second Floor Plans (Office of the Municipal Architect, 1941, DC Department of Government Services, Public Buildings Drawings)

District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds  
 Name of Property

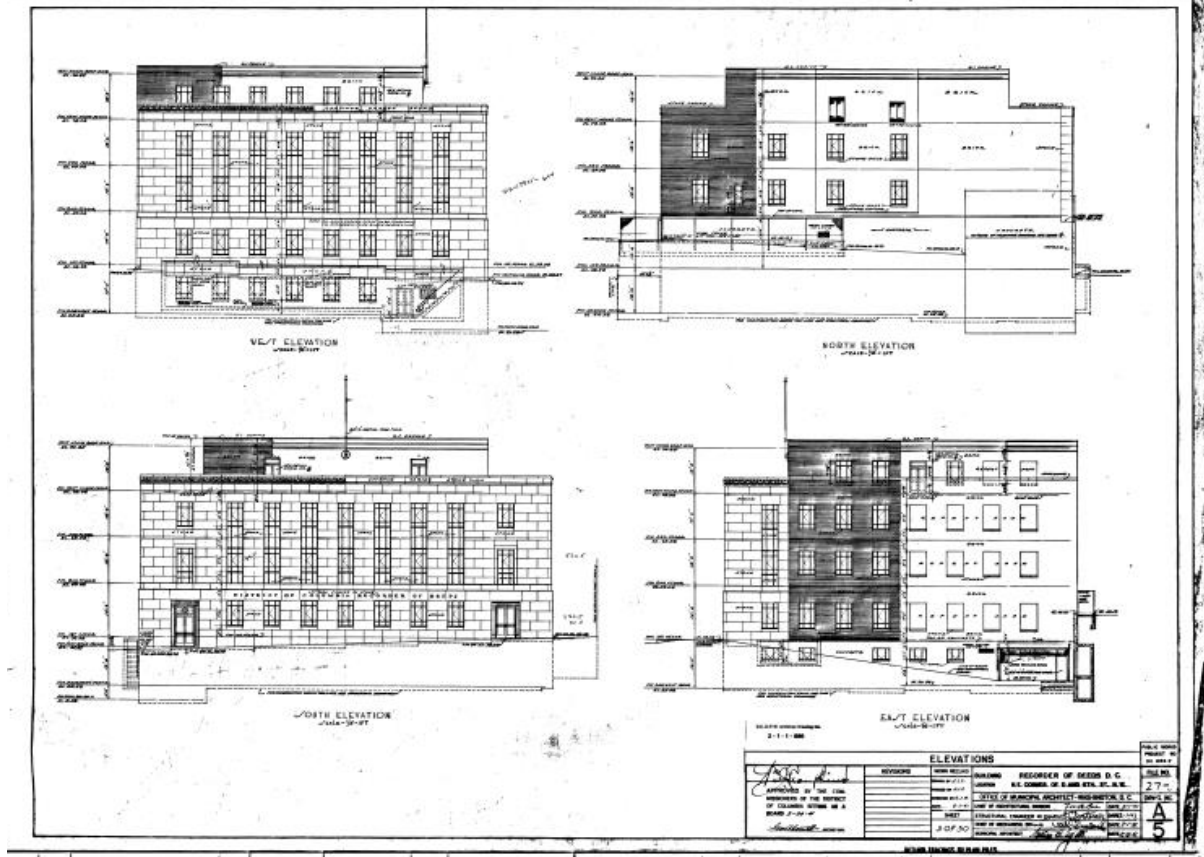
Washington, D.C.  
 County and State



Third Floor and Penthouse (Office of the Municipal Architect, 1941, DC Department of Government Services, Public Buildings Drawings)

District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds  
 Name of Property

Washington, D.C.  
 County and State



Elevations (Office of the Municipal Architect, 1941, DC Department of Government Services, Public Buildings Drawings)

District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds  
Name of Property

Washington, D.C.  
County and State



General view looking northeast showing south and west elevations  
1 of 23



View looking southeasterly showing west elevation  
2 of 23

District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds  
Name of Property

Washington, D.C.  
County and State



View looking northeast from corner of 6<sup>th</sup> and D streets  
3 of 23



View looking east showing north elevation of building abutting passageway between the Recorder of Deeds and adjacent building to the north  
4 of 23

District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds  
Name of Property

Washington, D.C.  
County and State



View looking west showing south and (part of ) east elevations  
5 of 23



View looking north showing drive and east elevation  
6 of 23

District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds  
Name of Property

Washington, D.C.  
County and State



View looking west (skyward) showing east elevation at end of first bay where stone meets brick walls  
7 of 23



District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds  
Name of Property

Washington, D.C.  
County and State



View looking north showing east elevation  
8 of 23

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Name of Property

Washington, D.C.  
County and State



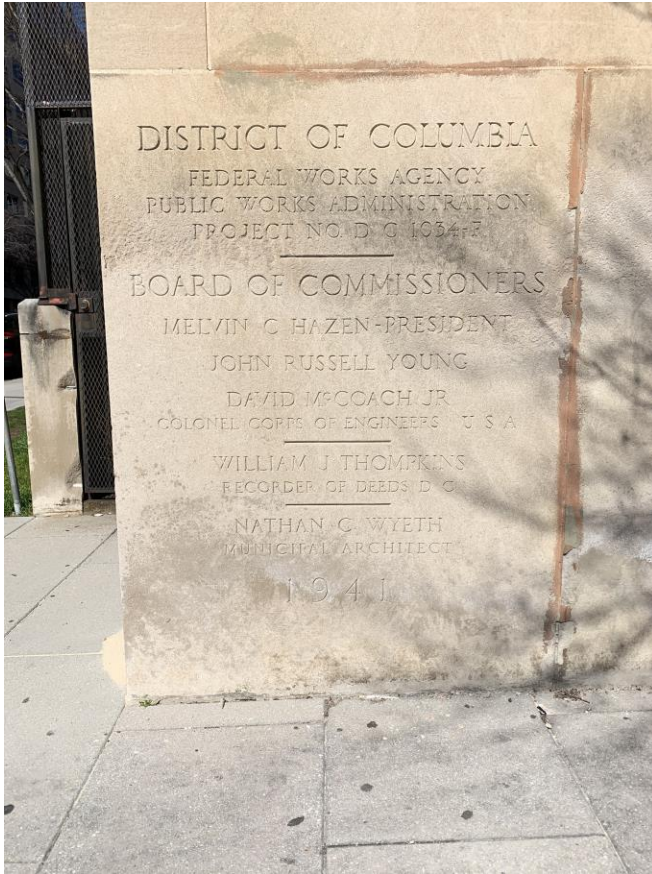
View of entrance door at east end of south façade  
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View looking east (skyward) showing windows and cornice detail on west elevation  
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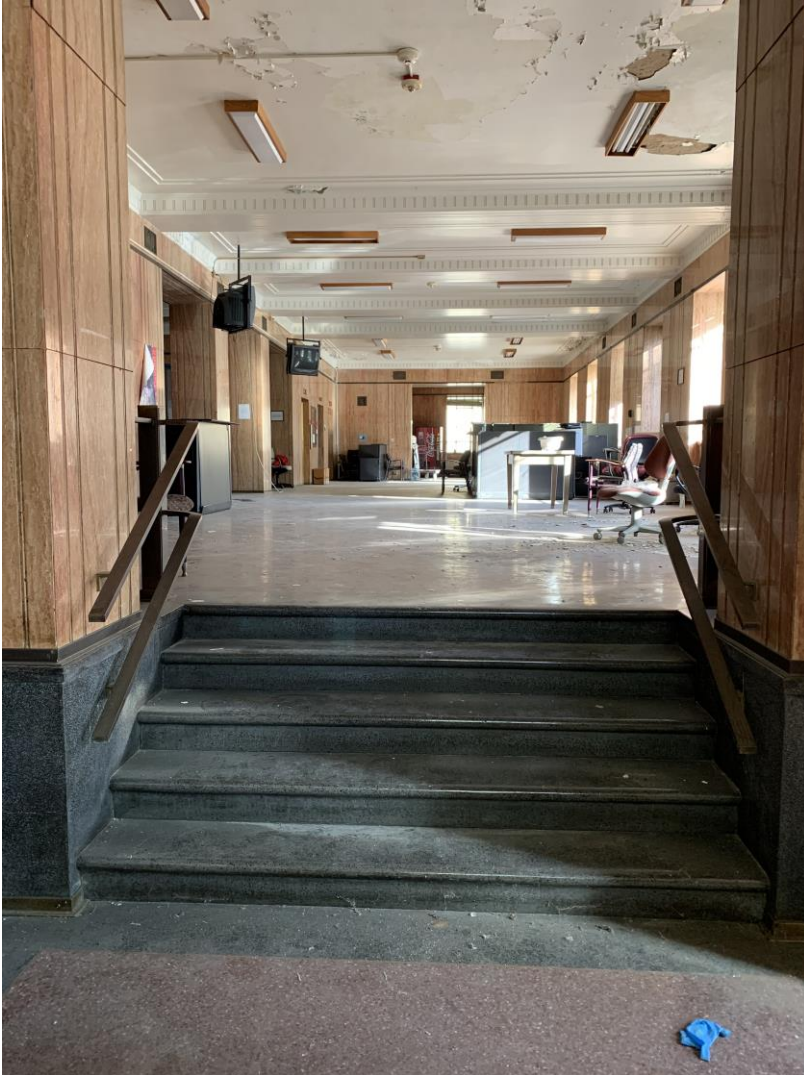
Washington, D.C.  
County and State



View of cornerstone at southwest corner of building at 6<sup>th</sup> and D streets  
11 of 23

District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds  
Name of Property

Washington, D.C.  
County and State



Interior view from west entry vestibule looking east to lobby  
12 of 23

District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds  
Name of Property

Washington, D.C.  
County and State



Interior view looking west from middle of lobby  
13 of 23



Interior view looking southwest from middle of lobby  
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District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds  
Name of Property

Washington, D.C.  
County and State



Interior view looking from lobby to elevator bank on north lobby wall  
15 of 23



Interior view looking northwest from lobby to foyer with Liber Room beyond (note wall murals covered for conservation)  
16 of 23

District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds  
Name of Property

Washington, D.C.  
County and State



Interior view looking northeast from lobby to foyer  
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Washington, D.C.  
County and State



Interior view looking north into stairwell from lobby  
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District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds  
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Washington, D.C.  
County and State



Interior view of Liber Room looking east  
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Name of Property

Washington, D.C.  
County and State



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20 of 23



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21 of 23

District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds  
Name of Property

Washington, D.C.  
County and State



Detail of "Four Freedoms" Sculpture of Franklin Delano Roosevelt  
22 of 23

District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds  
Name of Property

Washington, D.C.  
County and State



View of bronze door between entrance and vestibule  
22 of 23

District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds

Washington, D.C.

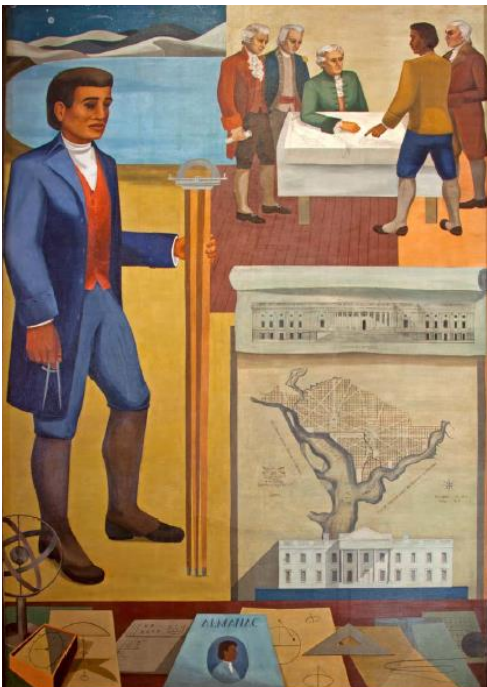
Name of Property

County and State

**Mural Photos:**



“Crispus Attucks—First Patriot Killed at Boston Massacre,” Herschel Levit, artist, located in west vestibule.



“Benjamin Banneker and the District of Columbia,” Maxine Seelbinder, artist, located in east vestibule

District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds  
Name of Property

Washington, D.C.  
County and State



“Frederick Douglass Appealing to President Lincoln,” William Edouard, artist, located in north wall, west side of foyer



“Shaw at Fort Wagner,” Carlos Lopez, artist, located on west wall, foyer



“Battle of New Orleans,” Ethel Magafan, artist, located on east wall, foyer

District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds

Washington, D.C.

Name of Property

County and State



"Courageous Act of Cyrus Tiffany at Battle of Lake Erie," Martyl Schweig, located on north wall, west side of foyer



"Commander Peary and Matthew Henson at the North Pole," Austin Mecklem, artist, located above mantel in library.

**Paperwork Reduction Act 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.460 et seq.).

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 100 hours per response including 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 Office of Planning and Performance Management, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC.

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**DESIGNATION**  
Of the District of Columbia

**HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD**  
In Historic Landmark Case 11-09

The Recorder of Deeds (and Interiors)  
515 D Street NW  
Square 489, Lot 802

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The Historic Preservation Review Board, having held a public hearing on December 19, 2019 on an application to designate the Recorder of Deeds building, 515 D Street NW, and its interior, designated the property a landmark to be entered in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites and requested that the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places for listing at the local level of significance. Its period of significance extends from 1943, the completion date of the building, to 1945 when the “The Four Freedoms” plaque of Frederick Delano Roosevelt was dedicated.

The building meets D.C. Designation Criteria A, B, D, E and F. It meets Criteria A and B as the site of events associated with historical periods, social movements, achievements and patterns of growth that contributed to the heritage, culture and development of the District for the following reasons: it is associated with the appointments of African Americans to the position of Recorder; it is a symbol of national achievement of African Americans; and it represents the African-American struggle for equal rights. In addition, the arts program, which is integral to the building, was conceived by African-American Recorder William Thompkins and celebrates the contribution of African Americans to the nation.

The building meets D.C. Designation Criterion D as it embodies the distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style and is an expression of urban planning and design. In particular, the building was built as part of the Municipal Center and designed in a stripped classical style complementary to the other buildings making up the complex. The inclusion of the Recorder of Deeds building within the complex represents the recognized importance of the office to the development of the city. The building meets Criterion E, because it possesses high artistic value that contributes significantly to the heritage and appearance of the District namely in its interior murals which are highly indicative of the New Deal-era public arts programs and are an excellent representation of public art.

The building meets Designation Criterion F, because it represents a notable work of design undertaken by the D.C. Office of the Municipal Architect under Nathan Wyeth. Although perhaps not the most sophisticated example of Wyeth’s stripped classical building designs, the building is an important example of the work of the office during his tenure.

For the above reasons, the Recorder of Deeds building also meets National Register Criteria A (Events) and C (Architecture).



## **Historical and Architectural Background**

Designed by the Municipal Architect's Office under Nathan C. Wyeth, the Recorder of Deeds building at 515 D Street NW was constructed as part of the city's long-planned and only partially realized "Municipal Center," a complex of city judicial and administrative buildings planned for Judiciary Square and the squares to its immediate south. The Recorder of Deeds building is the first and only purpose-built building to house the city's Office of the Recorder of Deeds. The position of Recorder of Deeds dates to 1863 when Congress created it, but was formalized in 1869, when Congress detailed the functions of the position and instituted a fee system to support a recorder's office and staff. As stipulated by Congress, the position of the Recorder of Deeds was to be appointed by the president and subject to Senate confirmation in the manner of a cabinet-level appointment. The recorder was responsible for registering, certifying and filing all deeds, mortgages, conveyances, quit claims, powers of attorney, leases, trust, incorporations, contracts, covenants, agreements, and similar documents. The recorder's office occupied rooms in the Old City Hall, moving around the building and its wings and in nearby rented space over the decades.

From the outset, recorders lobbied for a consolidated and fireproof space. Until the New Deal, such requests were ignored. Then, on July 13, 1940, President Franklin Roosevelt signed a bill allowing the District to receive a Public Works Administration loan to fund a recorder's building. Two months later, the president attended a ground-breaking ceremony, though designs were not ready until early 1941, and construction was not completed until 1943 due to World War II budget and material shortages. As designed by the Office of Municipal Architect under Nathan Wyeth, the smooth-cut limestone-clad building reflected an austere "stripped classical" style on the exterior, but offered warm wood and marble-paneled rooms on the interior along with an impressive array of richly painted murals and other art. The Treasury Department Section of Fine Art commissioned seven murals by different artists on subjects which "reflected the contribution of the Negro to the American nation." This theme, established by then Recorder of Deeds Dr. William Thompkins, was in keeping with the history of the Office of the Recorder of Deeds itself.

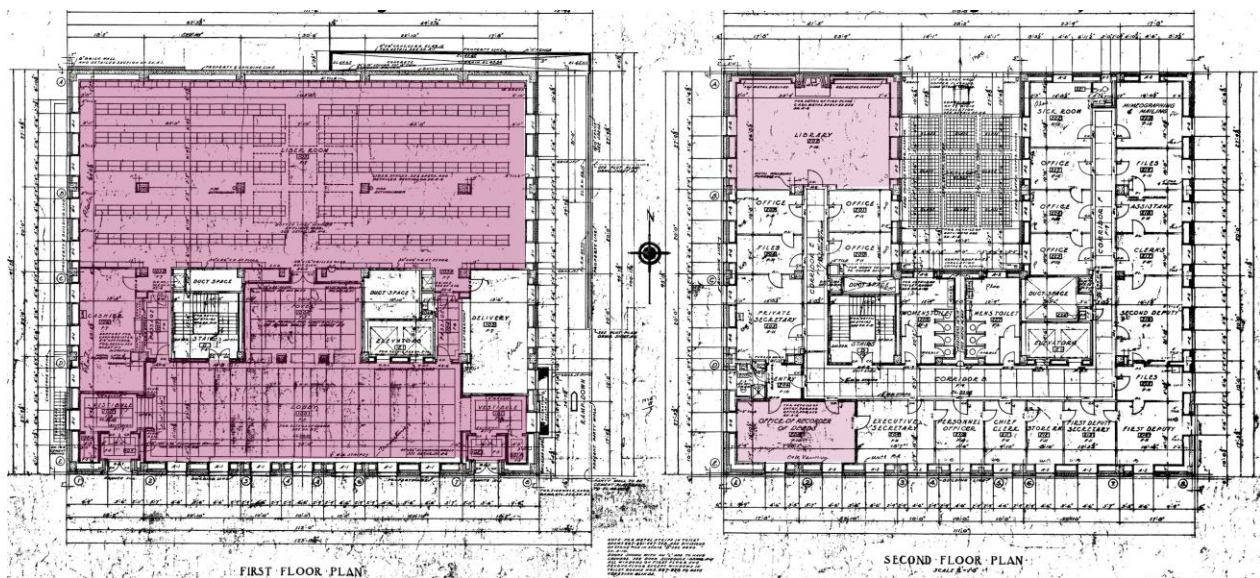
With the brief exception of the Reconstruction era, a system of racial discrimination and segregation restricted the appointment of African Americans to federal, state, and municipal positions until after World War II. The position of the Recorder of Deeds proved to be somewhat of an exception when, in 1881, James Garfield appointed Frederick Douglass to the position. Douglass was the first African American to hold the prestigious position, but he was not the first black employee. Three years earlier, Douglass's predecessor, General George A. Sheridan of Louisiana, had hired copyist Henrietta Vinton Davis, making her the office's first African-American employee. In 1886, Douglass resigned his position to make way for James C. Matthews, an African-American lawyer and New York Democrat, appointed by President Grover Cleveland. Despite a barrage of opposition that sprung from this appointment due to Matthews' race and to the fact that he was not a city resident, Cleveland did not concede, instead desiring "in this way to tender just recognition and good faith toward our colored fellow citizen." The appointments of Douglass and Matthews established a tradition whereby the president appointed African Americans to the prestigious and highly remunerated position. This tradition came to a halt from 1916 to 1922 under Woodrow Wilson but resumed under Warren G. Harding. While laudable, the tradition attracted opposition and widespread attention nationwide for its uniqueness; such a highly sought-after position clearly highlighted the limited opportunities for African Americans in public office.

Dr. William J. Thompkins, recorder from 1934 to 1944 and a determined advocate for the office, succeeded in his request for a building to house the recorder's office within a new Municipal Center complex. More notably, Thompkins was responsible for establishing the theme and defining the subjects of the building's murals that were then commissioned by the Treasury Department Section of Fine Art. Thompkins had already introduced a program of art into the office at 412 D Street when, in 1936, he arranged to have artists paint portraits of his ten African American and two white predecessors through the Works Progress Administration. For the seven murals, Thompkins identified important historical events in which African Americans played critical and heroic roles. Two of the seven, "Frederick Douglass Imploring President Lincoln" and "Benjamin Banneker and the District of Columbia," are associated with the District, while the others depict African Americans in national patriotic struggles elsewhere. The nomination provides a list, description and photographs of each of the murals.

Construction of the building was completed in 1943, final installation of the murals took place in 1944 and, in 1945, a plaque with a relief depicting President Roosevelt in profile was formally dedicated inside the building. The plaque, "The Four Freedoms," sculpted by African-American sculptor Dr. Selma Burke, was commissioned before Roosevelt's death.

### Boundaries

The designated boundaries of the Recorder of Deeds include the building, its lot, and interior spaces indicated by the colored areas of the floor plan below. The designated interior spaces include the first floor—exclusive of the stairwell, elevators and delivery room—and the second-floor library and Office of the Recorder. Significant features include the seven wall murals, the Selma Burke bas relief of Roosevelt, marble and wood wall paneling, terrazzo and parquet flooring, and original ceiling finishes.



The Board recognized that other works of art in the building, such as the portrait paintings, are significant to the history of the office and to the District of Columbia, but as movable objects, these have not been included as part of the interior designation.

**Integrity**

The Recorder of Deeds building retains high integrity of location, setting, design, materials, and workmanship with only minor alterations, along with a palpable sense of time, place and association.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Marnique Heath', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Marnique Heath, Chairman,  
Historic Preservation Review Board