

# LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT



## Old Chicago Main Post Office Building 433 West Van Buren Street

Final Landmark Recommendation adopted by the Commission on Chicago Landmarks, December 7, 2017



**CITY OF CHICAGO**  
Rahm Emanuel, Mayor

**Department of Planning and Development**  
David Reifman, Commissioner



The Old Chicago Main Post Office Building was the subject of many postcards over time. Top: Curt Teich & Co. postcard, accessed from <http://chuckmancollectionvolume16.blogspot.com/2016/05/postcard-chicago-new-post-office-1933.html>. Bottom: Accessed from [http://chicagopc.info/government\\_\\_post\\_office.html](http://chicagopc.info/government__post_office.html)

Front Cover: Tom Rossiter, photographer

*The Commission on Chicago Landmarks, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor and City Council, was established in 1968 by city ordinance. The Commission is responsible for recommending to the City Council which individual buildings, sites, objects, or districts should be designated as Chicago Landmarks, which protects them by law.*

*The landmark designation process begins with a staff study and a preliminary summary of information related to the potential designation criteria. The next step is a preliminary vote by the landmarks commission as to whether the proposed landmark is worthy of consideration. This vote not only initiates the formal designation process, but it places the review of city permits for the property under the jurisdiction of the Commission until a final landmark recommendation is acted on by the City Council.*

*This Landmark Designation Report is subject to possible revision and amendment during the designation process. Only language contained within a designation ordinance adopted by the City Council should be regarded as final.*

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# **OLD CHICAGO MAIN POST OFFICE BUILDING**

**433 WEST VAN BUREN STREET**

**BUILT: 1921 (UNITED STATES MAIL BUILDING)  
1934 (MAIN POST OFFICE BUILDING)**

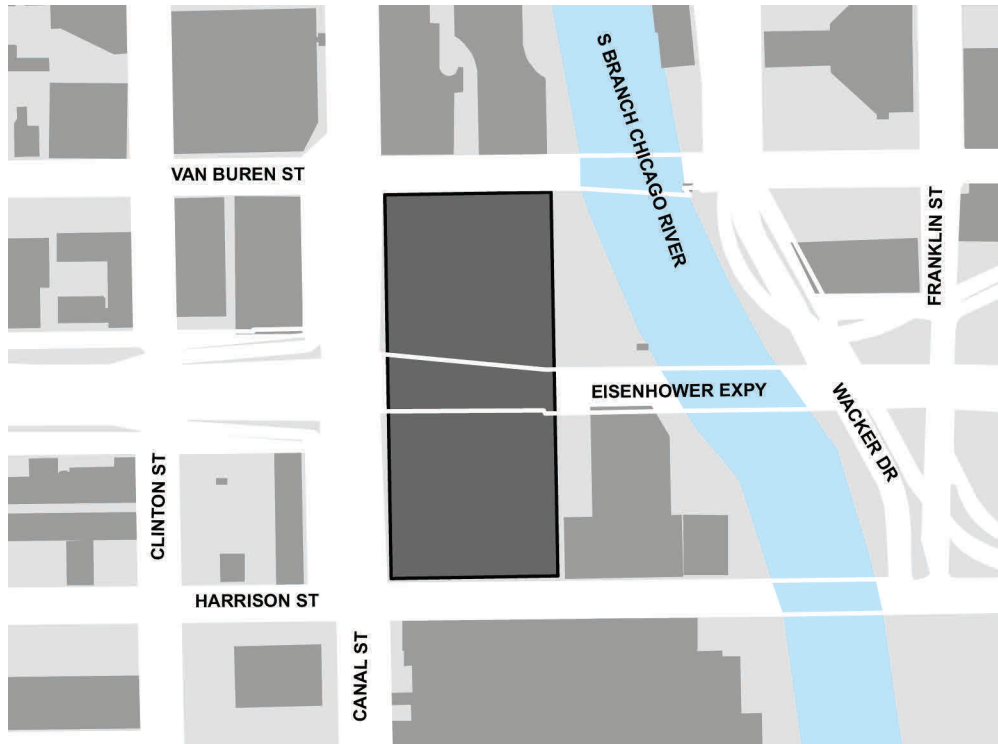
**ARCHITECTS: GRAHAM, ANDERSON, PROBST AND WHITE**

The Old Chicago Main Post Office Building is a "one-of-a-kind" building in the historic context of Chicago and is both locally and nationally significant for its historic role in mail delivery. It is the sole remaining historic main post office building for what was the United States' second largest city during the years of its active use as a critical hub of postal activity. As the main mail facility for Chicago, it made possible efficient and comprehensive postal service for the city and its larger metropolitan area. As importantly, the building was the nexus of activity for the transport of mail throughout the country, especially via rail. As such, the building was critical to communications in the United States in the age before the internet. A vast quantity of personal and business letters, advertising material and catalogs, magazines, parcel post, and other forms of mail all passed through the building during its more than sixty years of service.

The building began as a smaller, more modestly-designed United States Mail Building built in 1921 to facilitate the delivery of parcel post in and through Chicago. Its location over railroad tracks along the west bank of the Chicago River's South Branch allowed ease of integration between postal service activities and the railroads that served this federal department. During the next decade, the pressing need to replace the inadequate main post office in downtown Chicago encouraged the federal government to authorize expansion of the building into the city's new main post office, completed in 1934. Both phases of the final building's history and development can be seen in the overall form, configuration, and facades of the current building, especially on the east elevation, facing the river, where the earlier Mail Building is still visible.

The Old Chicago Main Post Office Building, through its location above Near West Side rail tracks and adjacent to Union Station, is one of the most significant buildings that resulted directly from the 1909 Plan of Chicago. Commissioned by the city's Commercial Club and created by a team headed by architects Daniel H. Burnham and Edward H. Bennett, the Plan of Chicago was a visionary effort to transform the city into a modern metropolis through comprehensive urban planning. Although much of the Plan failed to come to fruition, the concentration of rail facilities and associated buildings along the South Branch of the river, including Union Station and the Old Chicago





The Old Chicago Main Post Office Building is a nine- and twelve-story limestone-clad building designed in the Art Deco architectural style. It is located on the west bank of the South Branch of the Chicago River in the Near West Side community area and is bounded by the river, W. Van Buren St., S. Canal St., and W. Harrison St. (Tom Rossiter, photographer).

Main Post Office Building, is one of the most significant outcomes of the planning ideas articulated by the Plan of Chicago.

The Old Chicago Main Post Office Building is a grandly-scaled building designed in a Classical-influenced variation of the Art Deco architectural style. Federal government buildings had a long tradition of construction in Classical styles. The Main Post Office Building combines modernized Classical ornamentation with sleek, modern forms to create a building that is a prominent example of Art Deco-style architecture in Chicago.

The building's striking design is the work of the significant Chicago architectural firm of Graham, Anderson, Probst, and White. A successor firm to D.H. Burnham & Co., Graham, Anderson, Probst & White was the "go-to" firm for large-scale, architecturally-important buildings constructed in Chicago during the 1920s and early 1930s, and they were important in the implementation of aspects of the Plan of Chicago during this period. A partial list of their commissions reveals their striking influence on the appearance of Chicago today—the Wrigley Building, the Merchandise Mart, the Shedd Aquarium, the Pittsfield Building, the Field Building, the Civic Opera Building, the completion of the Field Museum of Natural History, and the Chicago Historical Society. Many of their buildings are designated as individual Chicago Landmarks or listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The Old Chicago Main Post Office Building is a visual "landmark" on the western edge of downtown Chicago due to its great scale and its location on the western bank of the South Branch of the Chicago River. The building is also visually unique with its historic vehicular passage built into the base of the building in 1934 and intended eventually to accommodate a large-scale roadway. Built twenty years later, the Eisenhower Expressway now passes through the building, making the building the de-facto "gateway" to Chicago's Loop for motorists from Chicago's West Side and the western suburbs.

## **THE UNITED STATES POST OFFICE DEPARTMENT IN CHICAGO UNTIL 1921**

The United States Post Office Department was established in 1792, early in the history of the United States. Despite uncertainty among the former English colonies that made up the new country what powers the federal government should have, all knew that a well-functioning postal service was necessary to bind the country together economically and socially. Throughout the next century, as the United States expanded to the west and settlers took control of new lands and established pioneering settlements across the North American continent, post offices were established.

In Chicago, the first post office existed even before the establishment of the pioneering settlement as a town in 1833. Mail was delivered to the home of trader John Kinzie for years before an actual post office building was built in the early 1830s. This log-constructed building, located at what would be near today's Lake Street and Wacker Drive intersection, was one-half post office and one-half general store.

Mail increased so much in the first few years that by 1834, the post office was moved to a nearby building at Franklin and South Water streets, then again in 1838 to a building at Lake and Clark streets. By this point, daily delivery from points both east and west had been established. In 1841,





**The Old Chicago Main Post Office Building is one of the largest buildings in Chicago's Central Area, covering two full blocks and containing more than 2.3 million square feet of interior space. Top: An aerial view of the building from the southwest, looking at the building's west façade (from Old Chicago Main Post Office Building, Part 2 application). Bottom: A view of the building from the northeast, looking at the east façade. The earlier 1921 United States Mail Building is clearly visible as the six-story section in the middle of the building's east façade (Tom Rossiter, photographer).**



the post office was placed in a building on the west side of Clark Street between Lake and Randolph (on the current site of the Thompson Center), where it remained for more than a decade. Then the post office moved to the Ashland Block, also on Clark Street, in 1853. These first years of Chicago's post office "shuffle" from one location to another epitomizes the later history of the United States Post Office Department in Chicago through the next century, as the city's astounding growth from pioneer trading post to the nation's second-largest city constantly outstripped the federal government's ability to manage mail deliveries for the city and surrounding region.

Finally, in 1855, the federal government constructed a purpose-built United States Post Office and Custom House. (Some sources extend the period of construction as late as 1860.) This handsome building, designed by Ammi B. Young and located on the northwest corner of S. Dearborn and W. Monroe streets, was three stories in height and designed in the Italian Renaissance Revival style with a rusticated first floor, round-arched doors and windows, and Classical-style cornice. Chicago's post office remained here until 1871.

By the end of the Civil War in 1865, Chicago had become the main distribution hub for east-west mail routes, and by 1870, the city was the second-largest post office in the amount of transacted business, conceding pride of place only to New York. The *Postal Record* for January 1872 noted:

*The Chicago post office now ranks second upon the books of the department at Washington in regard to business transactions. By this is meant the business which showed a revenue. But the facts are, more work is done at the Chicago post office at this time than at any other post office on this continent. Chicago is a point that catches mail from every point of the compass. For the East, West, North, and South, a great portion touches here and is handled by this office. During the past three months on several occasions, a hundred tons of mail matter has been handled a day in this city. Nearly twenty large wagons are required to transport these great mails between the post office and the various depots.*

Although "designed to be fireproof," as historian Frank Randall later noted, the United States Post Office and Custom House was destroyed in the Chicago Fire of 1871. Surviving walls would afterwards be reused in the construction of Haverly's Theater (long demolished). Heroic efforts were undertaken by postal workers to save mail stored in the building, and it was said that no mail deliveries were missed despite the fire devastation. A temporary mail facility was briefly established at the corner of State and 16<sup>th</sup> streets, then mail was handled from the Wabash Avenue Methodist Church at Wabash and Harrison, which was just outside the area of complete fire devastation. A subsequent post office was struck by fire in 1874, and after a temporary relocation to the West Division post office at Halsted and Washington streets, the main post office relocated to the Honore Building on the northwest corner of S. Dearborn and W. Adams streets while plans were made for a permanent facility.

This new Post Office and Custom House was built on part of the site of the current Federal Center, the block bounded by W. Adams, W. Jackson, S. Dearborn, and S. Clark. Designed by Alfred B. Mullett, William A. Potter and James B. Hill, with assistance, some accounts note, by John Mills Van Osdel, the new building was occupied by 1880 and was grandly scaled and designed in the Italian Renaissance Revival style. Sadly, it suffered from inadequate foundations, requiring its replacement after less than two decades of use. A temporary postal facility located on the east side of Michigan Avenue at the lakefront served until a new Federal Building was completed in 1905. This grand Classical Revival-style building was designed by Henry Ives Cobb and built on the



The United States Post Office Department has had a presence in the Chicago area since the city's earliest pioneer days. Top: A black-and-white photograph of a later painting, owned by the Chicago History Museum, showing an artist's rendering of the simple log building that contained the fledgling town's first post office. Bottom: The first purpose-built federal building in Chicago, this Custom House and Post Office building was built in the 1850s on the northwest corner of Dearborn and Monroe streets. It was destroyed in the Chicago Fire of 1871 (from <http://chicagology.com/chicagopostoffice/>).





**Top:** After the 1871 fire, the main post office occupied several interim buildings before the Post Office and Custom House at Dearborn and Adams streets became the city's main post office by 1880. It was designed in the Italian Renaissance Revival style (from <http://chicagology.com/chicagopostoffice/>)

**Bottom:** The 1880 building was replaced by the Federal Building, built on the same block (Dearborn, Adams, Jackson, and Clark) and completed in 1905. Designed by Henry Ives Cobb, this building housed Chicago's central post office until the Old Chicago Main Post Office Building opened in 1934. Despite scattered protests, the building was demolished in 1965 to make way for the current Federal Center designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (from <http://chicagology.com/chicagopostoffice/>).



same block as the previous Post Office and Custom House . A massive building with a soaring dome, it housed federal offices and courtrooms as well as the city's central post office.

This building survived until 1965, when it was torn down to make room for the John C. Kluczynski Building and the United States Post Office-Loop Station, buildings that were part of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's larger Federal Center. However, within a decade of its opening in 1905, Cobb's building was seen as inadequate as Chicago's primary post office, and discussion began about the need for a larger facility. At this time, the issue of a new main post office building became entwined with larger city planning efforts and the Plan of Chicago.

## **THE PLAN OF CHICAGO AND THE OLD CHICAGO MAIN POST OFFICE BUILDING**

By the turn of the last century, Chicagoans were beginning to come to grips with the fact that, although their city was now the second largest in the nation and a marvel of the modern industrial age, it continued to look and feel too much like the raw pioneer town from which it had sprung so quickly in the previous 70 years. It remained, in the eyes of many, more noteworthy for its industrial plants and Union Stock Yards than for art, culture and planning.

The 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, with its visually-stunning Classical-style “city in a park.” had shown both Chicagoans and the world that the city could be more than the “hog butcher for the world,” as Carl Sandburg's later poem would famously state. The exposition's careful arrangement of brilliantly-white buildings, placed in an orderly fashion and interspersed with lagoons, sculptures and other landscape embellishments, encouraged civic leaders to consider how to make the city both more functionally up-to-date and more beautiful. The Plan of Chicago was created to help make that vision of the city possible, and the Old Chicago Main Post Office Building is one of the more important structures built in direct response to the Plan.

The Plan of Chicago was commissioned by the Commercial Club, comprised of prominent Chicago businessmen and civic leaders. It was created in the office of D. H. Burnham & Co., a leading architectural firm led by Daniel H. Burnham, the architect in charge of the construction of the World's Columbian Exposition a decade and a half earlier. Burnham and his associate, Edward H. Bennett, pulled together a team that created the Plan, which was completed and made public in 1909.

Today, the Plan of Chicago is perhaps best known for its spectacular renderings of a future Chicago that were the work of artist Jules Guerin. These images touted a metropolis built in the manner of *fin-de-siecle* Paris with broad boulevards, diagonal streets radiating from landscaped circles and squares, and Classical-style public and private buildings. Perhaps the image that is remembered best today is one that shows a soaring City Hall building, topped by a sky-scraping dome, standing watch over a giant square at the intersection of Halsted and Congress streets on Chicago's Near West Side.

However, the Plan of Chicago was more than handsome renderings of European-style streetscapes and public parks. It was intended as a holistic look at Chicago and a list of physical changes that were needed to make it a world-class metropolis. It strongly focused on infrastructure – roads, parks, railroad stations and other public facilities. It called for the improvement of the lake front

through an extension of Lincoln Park north to the city limits and a new park, now Burnham Park, that would support recreation on the south lakefront. New roads both within the city and through suburbs were planned to facilitate automobiles, a new form of transportation. A large outer park system advocated by the Plan was later largely realized through the creation of the Forest Preserves of Cook County.

The Plan saw the west bank of the Chicago River's South Branch as a logical place for unified rail facilities, then spread out among a plethora of railroad stations and rail yards encircling the Loop. As part of this rail consolidation and rationalization, the Plan envisioned a new central post office situated between a pair of new railroad terminals along the South Branch. Although not completed quite like the Plan foresaw, the Old Chicago Main Post Office Building was built a block south of the newly-constructed Union Station and above railroad tracks that served both the Station and the Post Office. The close meshing of rail transportation, in the early twentieth century the primary means by which mail was shipped from city to city, and Chicago's main postal facility was a triumph of city planning encouraged by Chicago's great Plan.

## **THE CONSTRUCTION AND DESCRIPTION OF THE UNITED STATES MAIL BUILDING**

There began to be discussions between City of Chicago officials and the federal government as early as 1915 about the need for a new main post office building. On September 23rd of that year, Chicago Mayor William Hale Thompson hosted a luncheon for the purpose of discussing the planning and construction of a new post office building. Attending the luncheon were members of Illinois' Congressional delegation and members of the Chicago Plan Commission. Mayor Thompson then followed up with a conference on November 1 with Secretary of the Treasury William G. McAdoo, U.S. Postmaster General A.S. Burlison, Chairman Frank Clark of the Public Buildings Committee, Chairman John Fitzgerald of the House Appropriation Committee, and (again) the Illinois Congressional delegation to discuss the matter further .

Then, on January 7, 1916, the Committee on Public Grounds and Buildings of the U.S. House of Representatives held a special hearing on a bill authorizing the purchase of land for a new post office building. At this hearing, Charles H. Wacker, Chairman of the Chicago Plan Commission, made a case for a new post office building for Chicago:

*You cannot build too big to meet future needs . . . The story of Chicago's successive post office buildings is one chapter of inadequacy after another. No sooner has a building been finished than it has been proven too small for its purposes. Remodeling, crowding and high-pressure methods have been put into effect in vain, the business of the office has always exceeded the accommodations provided. And that, gentlemen, in the nation's second city in population and premier producer of postal revenues . . . The proposed Chicago post office will be at the pivotal center of the world's greatest postal system. Through the huge railway terminals nearby flows the most tremendous flood of postal matter that is centralized at any one point in this country. This flood of postal matter in Chicago manifestly affects mail distribution for the entire nation. As Chicago is the distribution center of the country, the facilities for that work in our city must be on a larger scale than in any other American city.*



The Old Chicago Main Post Office Building is one of the most important buildings built as a result of the 1909 Plan of Chicago. Created by a team led by Daniel H. Burnham (top left) and Edward H. Bennett (top right), the Plan recommended a plethora of infrastructure improvements for the city, including the construction of a new central post office on the west bank of the Chicago River's South Branch. Middle: A rendering showing the proposed post office (with tower) between train stations, one of which, to the left,



Images from *The Plan of Chicago: A Regional Legacy*.



The Old Chicago Main Post Office Building was not built at the exact location advocated by the Plan of Chicago. Instead, it was constructed several blocks to the south, between Van Buren and Harrison streets. This new site straddled what the Plan advocated as the future extension of Congress Street. Crossing the river, Congress was conceived as a grand European-style boulevard that would provide access to a new Civic Center, complete with a domed City Hall, to be built at the intersection of Congress and Halsted streets. Although the Civic Center was never built, the 1934 post office building was designed to accommodate a future Congress Street extension, fulfilled with the 1950s construction of the Congress (now Eisenhower) Expressway.



The Old Chicago Main Post Office Building was built in two stages. The United States Mail Building was built first in 1921. Extending south from Van Buren Street to Harrison Street, this new building was meant to relieve congestion at the main post office downtown by becoming the new center of parcel post receipt and delivery in Chicago. The Mail Building also housed offices for the Postal Transportation System, which managed the intricate system of mail trains throughout the country. Right: A drawing of the new building with its Classical-style north entrance facing Van Buren, demolished when the building was incorporated into the new 1934 building (from Chappell, *Architecture and Planning of Graham, Anderson, Probst & White, 1912-1936*).



A photograph of the United States Mail Building, above and next to below-grade railroad tracks leading to and from Union Station. The Old Chicago Main Post Office Building would be built over the tracks to the right of the Mail Building in this photograph, incorporating most of the older building as part of a much larger building (from Chappell, *Architecture and Planning of Graham, Anderson, Probst & White, 1912-1936*).

Despite the pleas of Chicago officials, a full-service post office building was not forthcoming. Instead, after a hiatus in most building construction caused by World War I, the United States Mail Building was built in 1921 as a parcel post center and headquarters for the Postal Transportation System (PTS), which managed the shipment of mail throughout the country. Chicago was the nerve center of mail-train operation, and it made sense for management of mail shipments to be handled from the city. The level of parcel post deliveries in and out of Chicago was also seen as needing immediate attention, especially due to the major mail-order houses that made Chicago their headquarters, including Sears, Roebuck & Co., Montgomery Ward, and Spiegel. Chairman Wacker noted in a 1915 speech: "The tremendous growth of the parcels post business must be reckoned with . . . The fact that the parcels post business of Chicago already exceeds that of any other five cities of the country combined should be remembered. . . ." By removing the handling of packages from the burden faced by the old main post office located in the Federal Building downtown, postal officials hoped that the need for a main post office building could be put off for awhile.

The new United States Mail Building was sited on the west bank of the Chicago River's South Branch, stretching from West Van Buren Street on the north to West Harrison Street on the south. If extended across the river at that time, Congress Street would have bisected the building. Built over railroad tracks leading to the under-construction Union Station a block to the north, the new mail facility's placement reflected the influence of the Plan of Chicago, which advocated such rail-mail congruency.

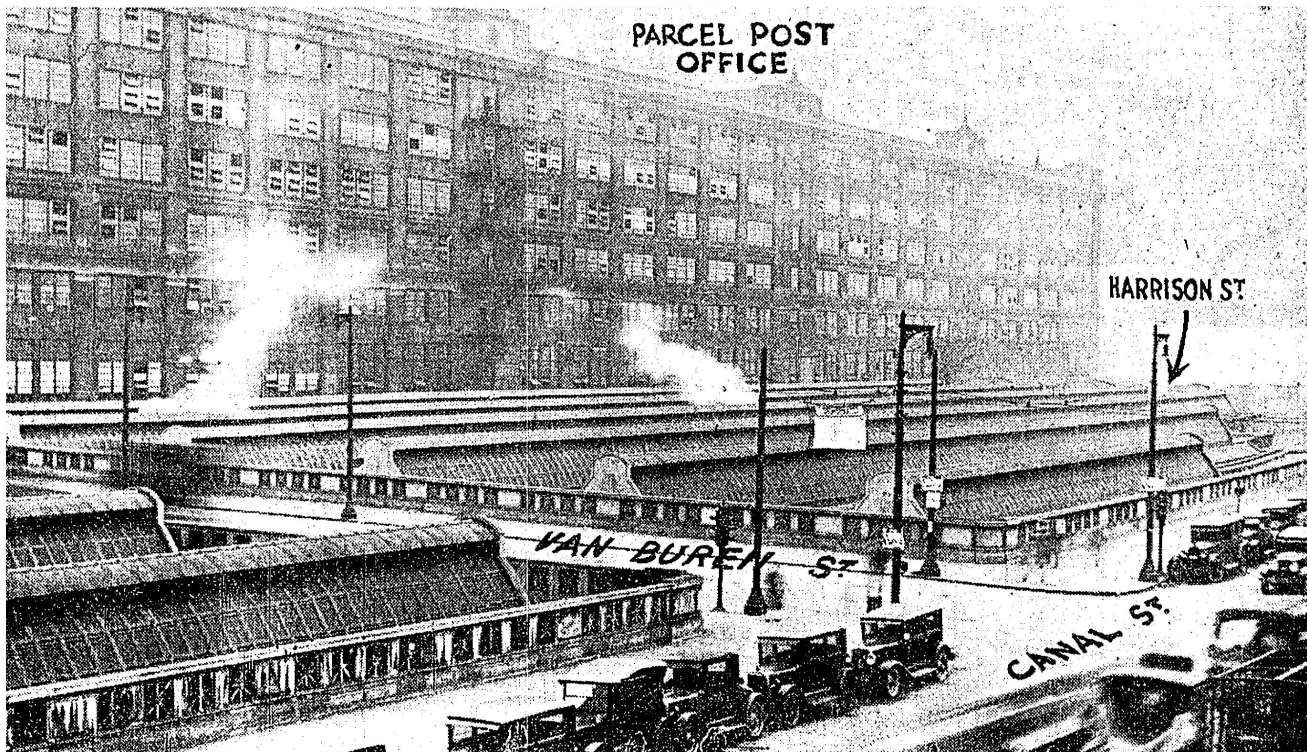
Completed to a design prepared by the Chicago architectural firm of Graham, Anderson, Probst & White, the United States Mail Building had six above-grade stories and was clad with buff-colored brick with terra-cotta trim. Boxy in form, the Mail Building combined both Classical-style ornament on the Van Buren facade with an overall industrial visual character, exemplifying its primary use as a transfer center for parcel post.

Today, the Mail Building remains partially visible as part of the Old Chicago Main Post Office Building. The east facade of the 1921 building facing the river remains visible. The original north and south ends of the building were removed at the time of the 1934 post office construction, and other facades have been subsumed by the later building. In addition, openings were cut through the 1921 building to facilitate the eventual extension of Congress Street across the river, accomplished with the completion of the Congress (now Eisenhower) Expressway in 1955.

## **THE CONSTRUCTION AND DESCRIPTION OF THE OLD CHICAGO MAIN POST OFFICE BUILDING**

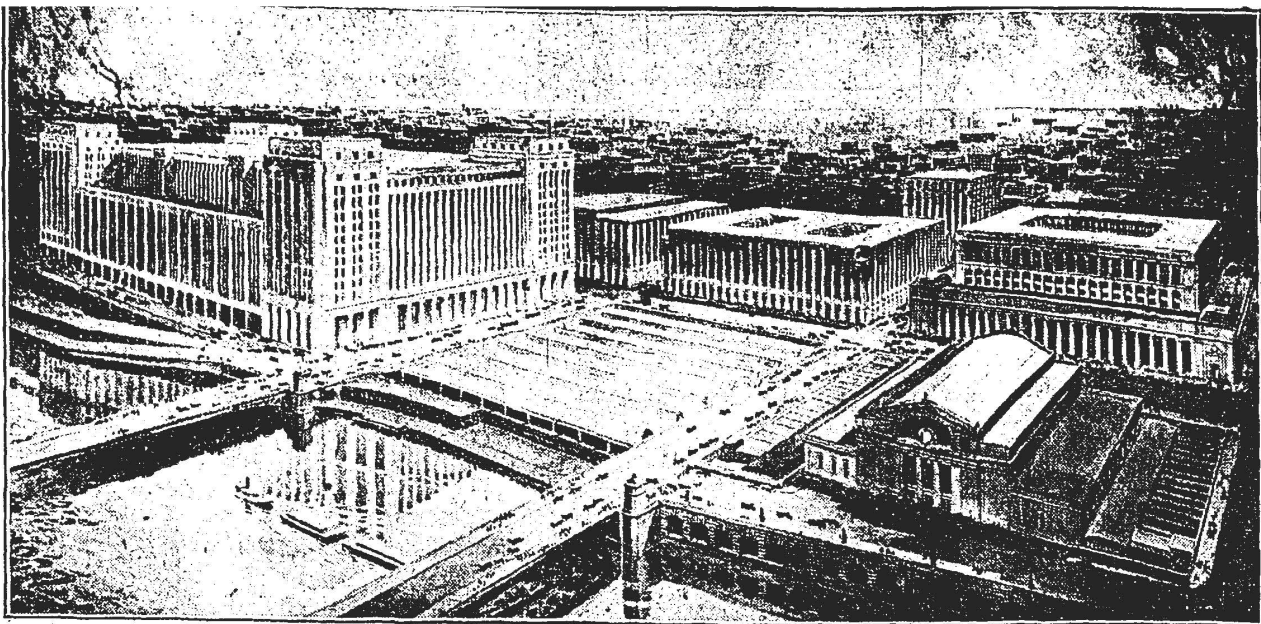
The completion of the United States Mail Building in 1921 provided some relief from the crowded conditions faced by Post Office Department employees working in the Federal Building downtown. But there continued to be advocacy for a new main post office building appropriate in size and scale to Chicago, by 1920 a city of more than 2.7 million people.

The Plan of Chicago called for a new post office to be built along the Chicago River's South Branch north of Union Station. Instead, the decision was made to place the new building south of the rail terminal and to incorporate the existing United States Mail Building into the new larger main post



A photograph of the United States Mail Building ("Parcel Post Office") as seen from the northwest, showing the below-grade rail tracks that would be covered by the planned Old Chicago Main Post Office Building. The original newspaper caption noted that the site, consisting of air rights above the tracks, was 297,917 square feet and cost the federal government \$5,500,000 to acquire. Construction of the new building was estimated to require 5,000 workers (from *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 16, 1930).

### A NEW VIEW OF THE WORLD'S GREATEST POSTOFFICE



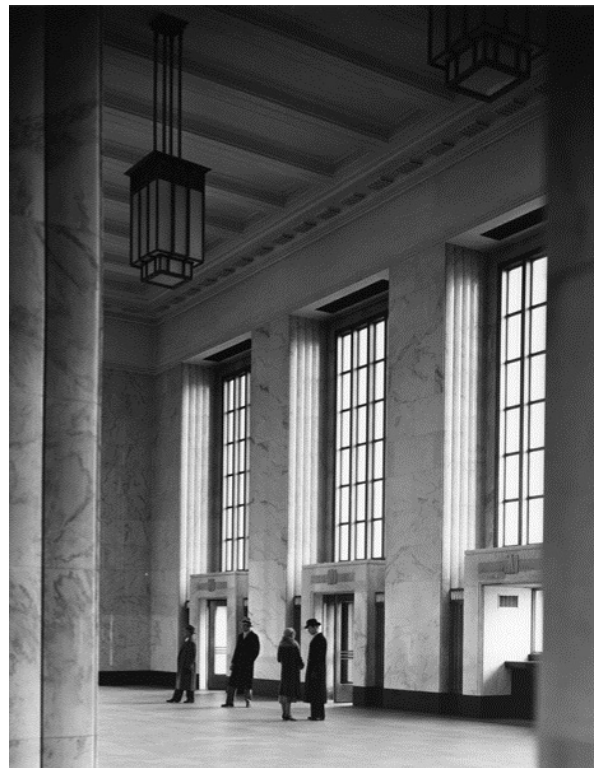
A rendering of the Old Chicago Main Post Office Building published in the July 12, 1931, issue of the *Chicago Daily Tribune*. It is seen in conjunction with Union Station (to the right) as it originally was comprised, with a headhouse (extant) and a concourse (nearer the river, demolished).





Photographs of the Old Chicago Main Post Office Building taken soon after its completion in 1934 (from Hedrich-Blessing photography collection, Chicago History Museum).





The main lobby of the Old Chicago Main Post Office Building is accessed through the building's main entrance off W. Van Buren St. Top: A rendering showing the building's modernized Classical / Art Deco-style entrance, with its visual "hint" of a Classical colonnade (from *The Architectural Work of Graham, Anderson, Probst & White, Chicago*). Above left: A rendering of the expansive main lobby, stretching across the entire north end of the building and detailed with similar modernized Classical / Art Deco forms and details (from *The Architectural Work of Graham, Anderson, Probst & White, Chicago*). Above right: A photograph detailing the lobby, showing doorways, tall windows and one of the ceiling light fixtures (from Hedrick-Blessing photograph collection, Chicago History Museum.)

office. The Public Buildings Act of 1926, known as the Keyes-Elliot Act, authorized a national survey on the need for postal facilities and provided funds for their construction. The Treasury and Post Office departments were also given latitude to hire outside private architectural firms to design such facilities. Amended in 1930 in the wake of the economic downturn being felt in the aftermath of the stock market crash the previous year, the Public Buildings Act encouraged action on a new Chicago main post office and made possible the hiring of Graham, Anderson, Probst & White as the building's architects. The firm had a stellar reputation for its design of large-scale buildings, including Union Station, the Civic Opera House, and the Merchandise Mart. They also had designed the Mail Building that was being incorporated into the new building. John Griffiths & Son, one of the city's largest building companies, was the contractor.

The *Chicago Daily Tribune* followed the planning of the Old Chicago Main Post Office Building over several years, commenting on the seemingly endless delays in the start of construction caused by federal wrangling over the building's site, construction financing and design. Finally, on May 23, 1932, U.S. Postmaster General Walter Brown laid the cornerstone for what was touted as the largest post office building in the world. Once construction started, it proceeded swiftly, with the building's dedication on February 16, 1934. Occupancy did not occur, however, until September 17 of that year, and a re-dedication and formal opening ceremony headed by former Postmaster General James Farley was subsequently held almost two weeks later on September 28. Records vary as to the cost of the finished building, from \$16 to \$22 million. Regardless, the new Chicago Main Post Office was a source of great pride for Chicagoans continuing to suffer the economic downturn of the Great Depression.

#### *Building description*

The Old Chicago Main Post Office Building is a grandly-scaled building stretching two city blocks along the east side of South Canal Street from West Van Buren Street on the north to West Harrison Street on the south. The building is clearly visible from the east across the Chicago River's South Branch. The building's main entrance and lobby opens off Van Buren. Truck access to the building is mainly from West Harrison Street. The building is supported by a steel-frame structure that spans railroad tracks that also serve Union Station to the north. The Eisenhower Expressway runs through the building from east to west, although there is no access to the building from the freeway, and the building is a visual "landmark" for the thousands of automobile commuters that pass through the building daily.

The Old Chicago Main Post Office Building is roughly massed as a rectilinear cube approximately 800 feet long from north to south and 345 feet from east to west. Overall, most of the building stands about 190 feet high, although towers at all four corners rise to 230 feet and there is a setback over the Mail Building portion of the building, which rises only about 115 feet. This translates into 12 floors in the building's north section, which historically contained offices, and 9 floors in the rest of the building, which housed a variety of postal delivery, processing and storage areas. All four sides of the building's exterior are finished with similar materials, window patterns and details, although the Van Buren facade, considered the "front" of the building due to the presence of the building's main entrance, has the greatest detailing and most refined finishes.

The steel-frame structure is clad with gray limestone accented with black granite at ground level. Its exterior is expressed as a distinct base, shaft and top. The base is dominated by large window openings, filled with multi-pane sash, that provide strong vertical emphases on the Van Buren elevation and at the base of corner towers. Elsewhere, the base typically has a series of punched windows, often above vehicular entrances. Above, the building's shaft is pierced by vertical tiers of





**Current photographs of the Old Chicago Main Post Office Building (Tom Rossiter, photographer).**

**Top: A view of the building from the west.**

**Right: A view from the southwest.**







**Left: A view of the building from the southeast.**

**Below and bottom: Views of the Van Buren entrance.**







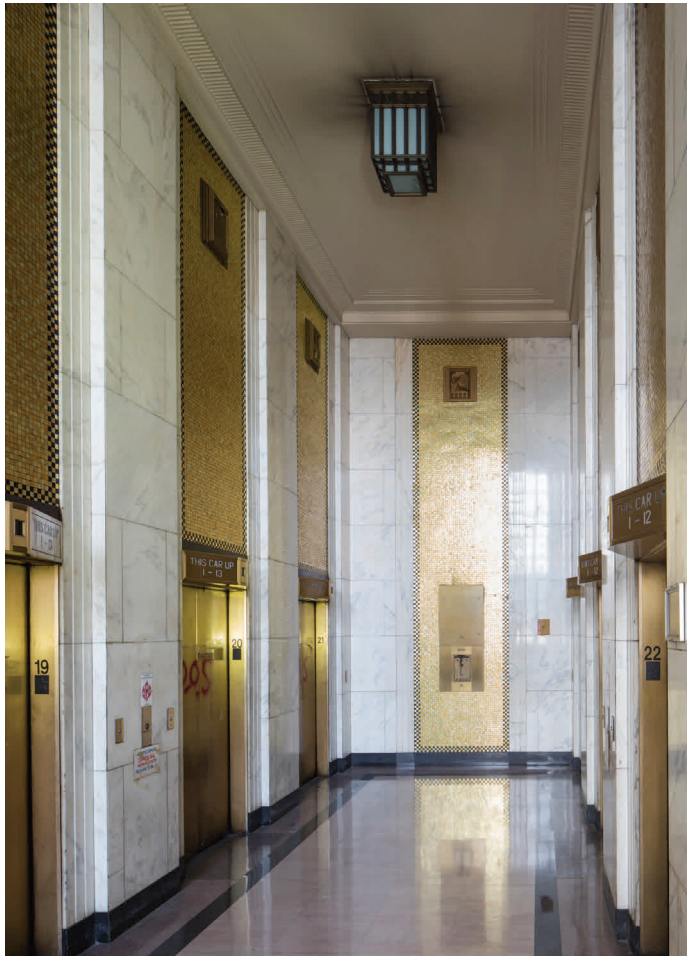
**Photographs of the building's main lobby with its white-marble walls, polychromatic-stone floor, gold glass-mosaic details, and rectilinear metal-and-glass light fixtures (Tom Rossiter, photographer).**

**Top: A view from the eastern end of the main lobby, with an elevator lobby to the left and the main lobby stretching towards Canal Street.**

**Bottom: A view of the south wall of the main lobby**



**Top: The western connecting lobby, looking south towards an elevator lobby.**



**Left: One of the elevator lobbies.**



painted steel windows separated by painted metal spandrels that provide a visual counterpoint to the strong horizontality of the building's massing. The corner towers have terra-cotta spandrels. The building's top has rows of punched windows, while the corner towers have subtly-modeled setbacks and vertical fluting. The overall visual effect is muscular power and grandeur restrained by simplicity, signifying importance without bombast.

The Van Buren facade contains the building's main entrance which provides access to the main lobby, which stretches across the entire length of the building from east to west. A monumental granite stairway, wide yet relatively shallow, provides access to bronze entrance doors facing Van Buren. Entrance doors are set within light gray-marble surrounds, ornamented with simple moldings, that are in turn set within highly-vertical, grandly-scaled rectangular openings with multi-pane window sash of ornamental metal punched through the gray-limestone wall. The walls forming these openings have smooth limestone facing the street and fluted limestone within the openings. Window sash is detailed with Art Deco-style chevrons. Similar windows, tall and large in scale, flank these entrances and turn the corners to the east and west facades. Flagpoles extend outward from the "piers" between these tall, narrow entrance openings. The words, "UNITED STATES POST OFFICE," are in the "frieze" above the building's entrance. The visual effect is of a modernized Classical colonnade of great scale emphasizing rectilinear solids and voids.

Inside, the main lobby is rectangular in overall plan and very tall and long, stretching 350 feet from east to west, 40 feet in width, and 38 feet in height. It is subtly divided into three parts - a central hall, twin elevator lobbies at the east and west ends, and connecting secondary lobbies that serve as transition between the central hall and elevator lobbies. Piers slightly separate the secondary lobbies from the central hall. Walls are clad in white marble, while stone floors are ornamented in a beige checkerboard pattern with large central compass rose in contrasting black, brown and pink/beige. Pilasters on the inner lobby wall are paired with the windows on the outer wall. Former teller booths between these pilasters have infill panels clad with gold glass mosaic tiles. Such tiles also are used to detail elevator lobbies at either end of the main lobby. Stylized eagles set against fluted rectangles are above the inside of building entrances, while gold panels with stylized Art Deco-style ornament honoring railroads and other motifs associated with the postal service are found through the hall in niches and in association with gold-mosaic panels. The tall ceiling is ringed by a heavy plaster cornice and subdivided by plaster "beams" spanning the space from north to south. Large rectangular bronze and glass light fixtures hang from the ceiling. The overall visual effect of the lobby is rich, tasteful and modernistic while retaining elements of Classical tradition.

The rest of the Old Chicago Main Post Office Building, in contrast to its highly-decorative main lobby, is largely more utilitarian in visual character, combining offices, typically at the north end of the building, with large work spaces extending to the south that historically were used for the delivery, sorting and storage of mail. As such, much of the building's interior resembles that found in everyday industrial, warehouse and commercial buildings.

#### *The historic functions of interior spaces in the Old Chicago Main Post Office Building*

The systems used for processing and sorting mail in the Old Chicago Main Post Office Building remained consistent from the time of its opening in 1934 to the 1960s, when automated systems were first introduced. Until such automated systems began to be introduced, basic functions of the post office were handled by workers through largely manual processes. The main function of a post office was the sorting of mail, and the first step in this process with new mail was called "facing," or turning the envelopes all in one direction to run through cancelling machines. The new



Chicago main post office had the best-quality cancelling machines available, with a operational rate of about 25,000 letters an hour. Letters then went to primary sorting, which was done using a "case," or cabinet of pigeon holes into which the mail was filed according to broad categories of country, state or large city. Afterwards, secondary sorters sorted by cities and towns within a state, also using a pigeon-hole system. Sorted mail was then tied into bundles intended for the same destination. Each bundle received a "facing slip," or label, indicating the time, the clerk's name, and the source and destination city. Mail bundles were then taken to the "puching rack," where they were placed in open mail pouches for transport. All of this steps required precise timing and movements on the part of staff, who were supervised closely by managers for speed and accuracy.

The following description of the building and how the building's interiors supported mail processes is taken from a commemorative booklet, *Chicago Main Post Office*, published by the United States Post Office Department. Although undated, it uses statistics largely from the 1930s and appears to date from before the creation of the Eisenhower Expressway in the 1950s.

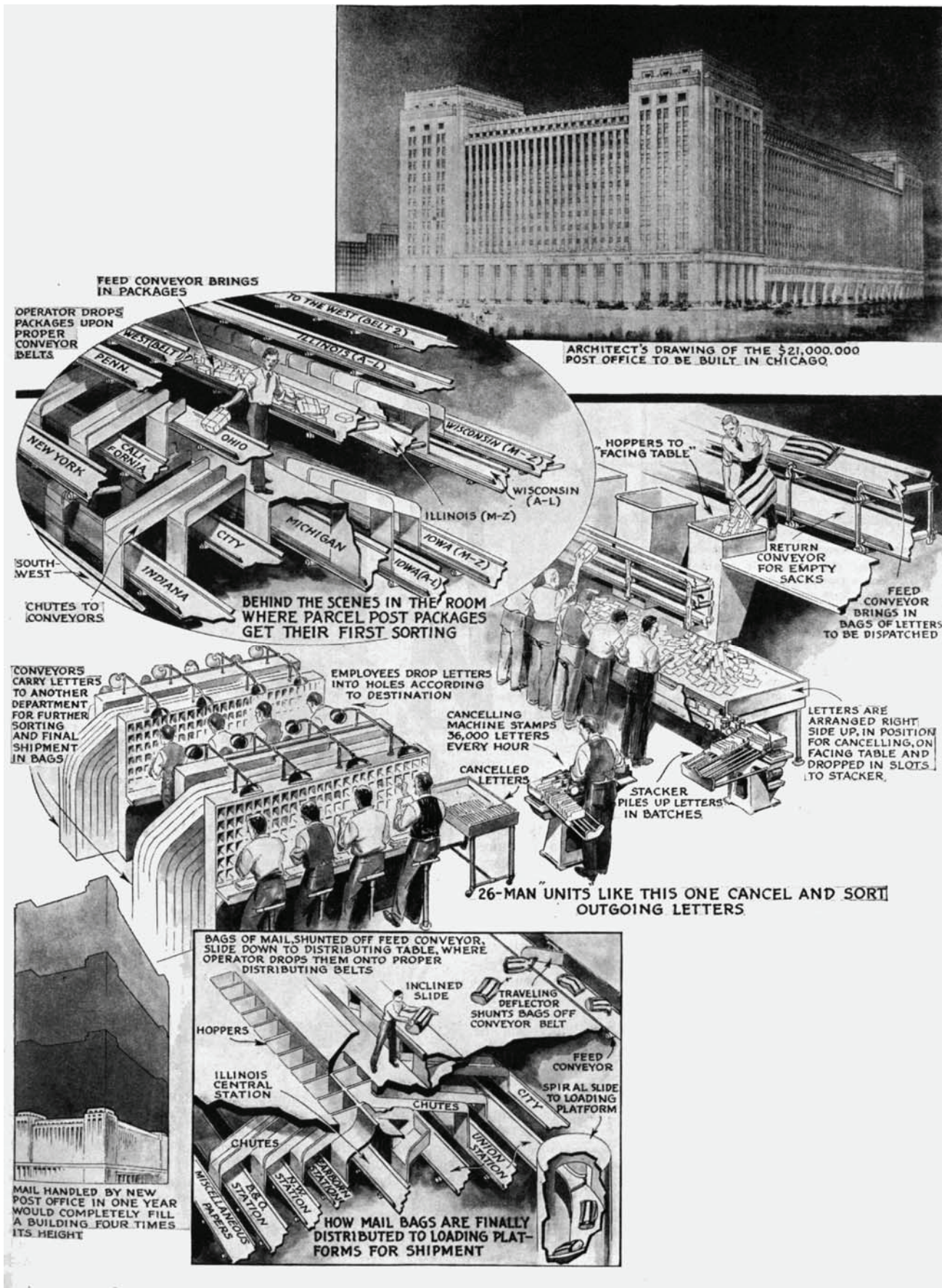
The brochure touted the Old Chicago Main Post Office Building as the "largest post office building in the world" with 2,309,000 square feet of floor space. It could handle 35,000,000 letters and 500,000 sacks of papers and parcels daily. Underneath the building, 125 trains daily brought mail in and out for processing.

The **main floor** contained the main lobby at the building's north end. The lobby provided the main point of contact between postal employees and the general public. It contained the Postal Savings Bank, wholesale and retail postage stamp windows, general delivery and special delivery windows, registry and money order windows, letter drops, a lock box section and an information counter. At either end were elevator lobbies to upper floors. Dispatching docks extending more than 1500 feet took up most of the rest of the building's main floor.

The Postal Savings Bank had 199,450 depositors as of July 1, 1938, with a combined total of \$93,160,000 on deposit. Approximately \$33 million worth of postage stamps and post cards were sold annually. The General Delivery Section served about 2500 transient persons who called for their mail daily. The information counter took about 35,000 telephone calls and in-person inquiries each month.

The **second floor** had receiving platforms totaling approximately 1100 feet in length on the south end of the building that were reached through ramps off Harrison Street. Over 60 tons of "outsize" parcels, or parcels that couldn't be handled in mail sacks due to size or content, were sorted on this floor as well. Also on this floor were sorting areas for the Special Delivery Section (about 4 million such parcels and letters handled annually) and the Money Order Section (approximately 6.2 million money orders issued yearly).

The **third floor** contained a Print Shop responsible for over one billion labels printed every year; a Supply Section serving the needs of the Chicago Post Office, its satellite stations and many post offices in Illinois; and the Second Class and Permit Section, where metered, second-class, and bulk third-class mail were handled. At the north end of the floor were offices for the Assistant Superintendents of Mails and Delivery.



A diagram of the internal mail sorting functions of the Old Chicago Main Post Office Building, published in the August 1931 issue of *Modern Mechanix*.

The **fourth floor** housed the Delivery Division which handled mail destined for local Chicago delivery, as well as offices of the Postmaster, Assistant Postmasters, Superintendents of Mails and Delivery, and other administrators. A Canteen on this floor had a 1,600-person capacity and a staff of 100; it operated around the clock, providing both cafeteria and sit-down restaurant service. Also on this floor was the Post Office Employees' Credit Union Bank, a First Aid Station, and a branch of the Chicago Public Library for the enjoyment of post office staff.

The **fifth floor** also housed Delivery Division workers, as well as a Directory Section that worked to deliver mail with faulty or incorrect addressing.

The **sixth floor** handled parcel post amounting to roughly 1.7 million packages a day. The Rewrap Unit was also on this floor, where workers repackaged parcels that had come apart or been damaged in transit.

The **seventh floor** housed the Mailing Division, whose function was the primary separation of domestic parcel post and paper mails; and the Foreign Section, which every day dealt with about 70,000 letters and 35,000 pieces of parcel and newspaper mail from foreign countries.

The **eighth floor** continued the work of the Mailing Division with the cancellation and distribution of first-class and circular mails, daily papers, and special delivery parcels intended for out-of-town delivery. The floor had roughly 50 mechanical and "plain facing" tables along with 59 motorized cancelling machines that were used to postmark the 32,000 letters and cards handled every minute during peak periods. As of the writing of this booklet, the daily average for this floor was the handling of about 4 million pieces of first and third-class mails, 65% of which were handled between the hours of 4:30 and 8:30 p.m.

The **ninth floor** contained the Mail Bag Depository with a capacity of approximately 3.5 million bags. Machine, carpenter and mail box repair shops were also on this floor. Also located here was the Nixie Section, whose mission was to decipher addresses on mail that couldn't be delivered because it was incomplete or illegible; the Inquiry Section and Tracing Branch, which handled customer inquiries about lost, damaged and undelivered mail; and the Dead Letter Office and Dead Parcel Post Branch, the keeper of undeliverable mail.

The **tenth through twelfth floors** in the office section of the building housed offices. Some were used by the Post Office Department, while others were used for unrelated government agencies such as the Sixth Army Corps of Engineers, which was housed on the tenth floor.

## **THE OLD CHICAGO MAIN POST OFFICE BUILDING AND THE ART DECO STYLE**

The Old Chicago Main Post Office Building is a significant example of the Art Deco architectural style as used for a large-scale government building. The building's hard-edged form, simplification of design to basic geometry, and use of geometric ornament exemplify the Art Deco style. The building also is decorated with simplified Classical-style ornament in a manner that represents a sub-type of Art Deco sometimes called "Modern Classicism." As the most important government building built in Chicago since arguably the City Hall-County Building was completed in 1911, the Old Chicago Main Post Office Building exemplifies the 1930s, a decade of great architectural





**The Old Chicago Main Post Office Building is a significant example of an Art Deco-style building with modernized Classical forms and details. The 1930s saw the design and construction of a number of such buildings that embraced both tradition and modernity in their designs.**

**Other examples of Chicago buildings combining Art Deco and modernized Classical forms and details include (clockwise from top) Madonna della Strada Chapel at Loyola University Chicago (Terry Tatum, photographer); the United States Custom House, 610 S. Canal St. (from <http://wikimapia.org/2624673/US-Customs-House>); and the Chicago Federation of Musicians Building at 175 W. Washington St. (from <http://arcchicago.blogspot.com/2015/09/for-labor-day-hidding-in-plain-sight.html>).**

change in America as modern styles became popular for government buildings that, in an earlier era, would have been unabashedly designed in the Classical Revival style.

The Art Deco style achieved popularity in the late 1920s and 1930s as a non-historic architectural style ornamented with often bold decorative detail. It is credited as originating at the *Exposition des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes* held in Paris in 1925, but the style was quickly transformed by architects throughout the world, including the United States, into a broad, popularly-based manner of design that eschewed historic revivalism in favor of visual innovation.

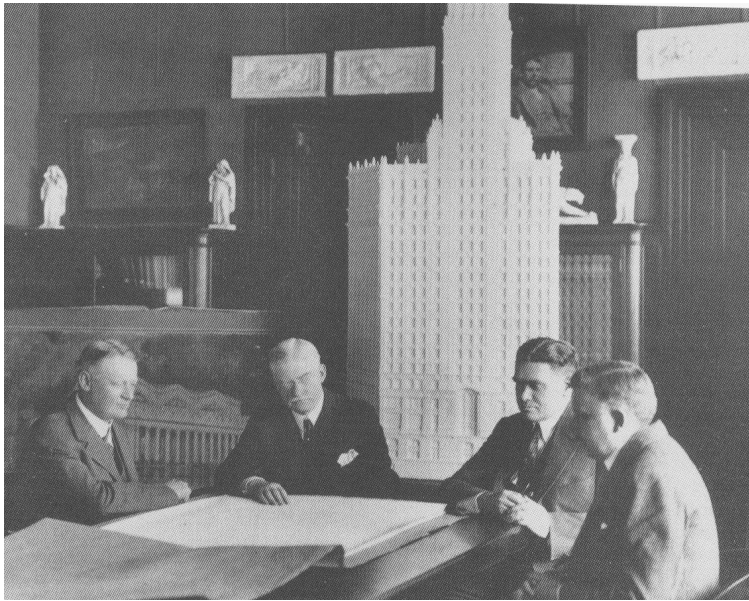
Visually, Art Deco-style buildings can vary greatly. Some are highly decorative, often utilizing colorful terra cotta that form a plethora of stylized and abstracted geometric and foliate ornament. Other examples are more monochromatic in their use of visually-subtler limestone or granite while also embracing non-historic ornament, including zig-zags and chevrons. Still other Art Deco-style buildings straddled tradition and modernism through the utilization of modernized Classical forms and ornament. They retain such Classical features as pilasters, capitals, and ornamental friezes, but these elements are visually simplified and "pared-down." Such "Modern Classical" buildings "read" as "of the moment" rather than as historical without completely abandoning tradition.

Although most often used for commercial properties, Art Deco influenced the design of government buildings in the 1930s, including Chicago's main post office. Government buildings built in Chicago and throughout the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century typically had been Classical in appearance. This began to change in the 1930s, as modern styles such as Art Deco and Moderne came to the fore. During this decade, the federal government built a number of government office buildings and courthouses around the country both to fulfill pressing spatial needs and to provide needed spending to benefit the nation's building industry, struggling thanks to the almost-complete cessation of privately-financed construction during the Depression. Many of these buildings were built in the "Modern Classical" sub-type of Art Deco.

The Old Chicago Main Post Office Building is a fine example of this kind of Art Deco-style architecture. The building is cubic in massing, with a simplified form and windows either "punched" through walls or arranged in vertical tiers. Non-historical, Art Deco-style ornament such as chevrons ornaments first-floor window sash, while fluting details the building's main entrance and the upper floors of the corner towers. The building's main lobby just off Van Buren has both modernized Classical forms and proportions combined with stylized Art Deco-style details such as eagles and low-relief panels. The result was clean-lined and up-to-date, while retaining a richness of visual character, helped by the use of handsome materials such as white marble and gold glass mosaic, that is not as starkly functional-looking as early International Style buildings being built in Europe during this period.

Although the Art Deco style is common in Chicago, it was relatively little used for government buildings. The nearby United States Custom House, built in 1932 and designed by a team of architects comprised of James A. Wetmore, Burnham Brothers, and Nimmons, Carr & Wright, is the closest comparable in terms of style. Several branch post office buildings scattered through the city also are designed in the Art Deco style, although much smaller than the main building downtown. As for examples of Art Deco-style buildings utilizing "Modern Classical" forms and details, two such buildings in Chicago include the Chicago Federation of Musicians building at 175 W. Washington St. (1933, third floor added 1949) and Madonna della Strada Chapel on the Far North Side campus of Loyola University Chicago, built in 1939.





The Old Chicago Main Post Office Building, both as the earlier United States Mail Building and its 1934 expansion, is the work of the significant Chicago architectural firm of Graham, Anderson, Probst and White. A successor firm to D. H. Burnham & Co., the firm designed many iconic Chicago buildings in the 1920s and 1930s.

Top left: A photograph of the firm's partners, Ernest Graham, Pierce Anderson, Edward Probst, and Howard White, seated in front of a model of the Wrigley Building, one of the firm's best-known designs (from Chappell, *Architecture and Planning of Graham, Anderson, Probst & White, 1912-1936*). Top right: The Wrigley Building and its north annex, built in 1921 and 1924, respectively (from "Wrigley Building" Chicago Landmark designation report).

Above: The Shedd Aquarium, built in 1929, is one of several museum buildings that the firm either designed or supervised the construction of a design by a predecessor firm (from <https://chicagology.com/skyscrapers/skyscrapers025/>).

Right: Graham, Anderson, Probst and White designed a number of Loop skyscrapers, including the Pittsfield Building (1927) (from "Wrigley Building" Chicago Landmark designation report).

The Wrigley Building and the Pittsfield Building are individually-designated Chicago Landmarks.





The Old Chicago Main Post Office Building is one of several Graham, Anderson, Probst and White-designed buildings that transformed the banks of the Chicago River during the 1920s and 1930s.

Top: The Great Hall of Union Station, completed in 1925 (from [http://www.wikiwand.com/fr/Union\\_Station\\_\(Chicago\)](http://www.wikiwand.com/fr/Union_Station_(Chicago))).

Left: Boldly-detailed ornament above an entrance to the Civic Opera House Building (1929) (from "Wrigley Building" Chicago Landmark designation report).



The Merchandise Mart, completed in 1930 (from <http://www.jcosmas.com/realphotopostcards1.html>).

Union Station and the Civic Opera House Building are individually-designated Chicago Landmarks.

## ARCHITECTS GRAHAM, ANDERSON, PROBST AND WHITE

The Old Chicago Main Post Office Building, both in its earlier iteration as the United States Mail Building and its expansion into the current building, is the work of Graham, Anderson, Probst and White. A successor to D. H. Burnham & Co., it was among the most significant architectural firms in Chicago in the years between World Wars I and II. It designed a wide variety of buildings and structures, including skyscrapers, train stations, museums, government buildings, and manufacturing complexes.

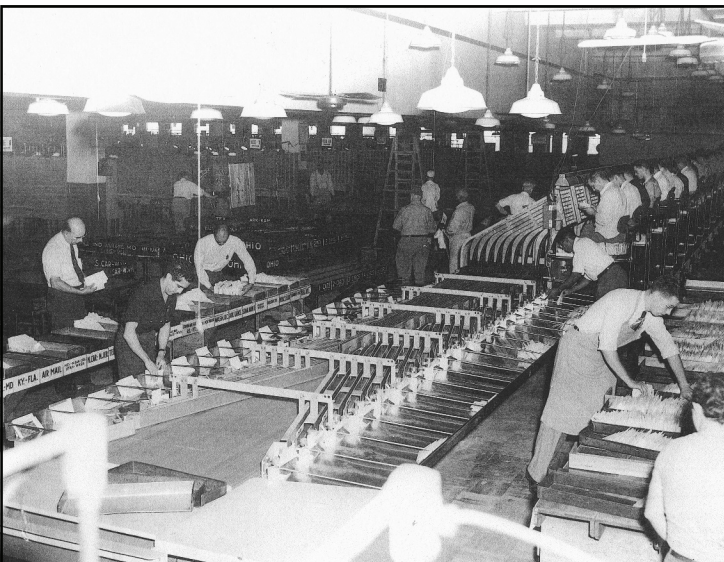
The firm's senior partners were **Ernest Robert Graham (1868-1936)** and **William Pierce Anderson (1870-1924)**, important earlier partners to Burnham. Graham was a native of Lowell, Michigan, and received his education at local schools. At age sixteen, he also began to work for his father as a carpenter and mason. Upon his father's death, Graham, at that time in his twenties, came to Chicago to find work. Within ten years of starting with Burnham's firm as a draftsman, he was made a partner. Early in his career, Burnham gave Graham the responsibility of supervising construction of several buildings at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition. Besides his professional accomplishments, Graham was a noted philanthropist, donating both funds and antiquities to the Field Museum (which his firm completed after its design under Burnham's watch) as well as establishing the Graham Foundation, a Chicago-based non-profit with international reach in its support of art and architectural research, exhibitions, and creativity.

Pierce Anderson was the most cosmopolitan of Graham, Anderson, Probst and White's partners. He was born in Oswego, New York, but spent his boyhood in Salt Lake City, Utah. After a stint in a New York military academy, Anderson attended Harvard, where he received his A.B. degree. He then attended the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris at Daniel Burnham's advice, graduating in 1899. He then returned to the United States and joined Burnham's firm the following year. Especially skilled at draftsmanship, Anderson quickly became one of Burnham's chief designers and was later the head of the design department at Graham, Anderson, Probst and White. Anderson was appointed by President Taft in 1912 to the Fine Arts Commission in Washington, D.C., filling a vacancy created by Burnham's death, and is credited for bringing the firm a good number of commissions from cities throughout the country.

Other partners in Graham, Anderson, Probst and White include **Edward Probst (1870-1942)** and **Howard Judson White (1870-1936)**, both native Chicagoans and also veterans of D. H. Burnham & Co. Probst was educated at public schools before entering the architectural office of Robert G. Pentecost at age 17. He joined D. H. Burnham & Co. in 1898. White also attended public school in Chicago and received technical training at the city's Manual Training School. Entering Burnham's office at age 18 as a junior draftsman, he rose quickly through the ranks of the office.

After Anderson's death in 1924, several Graham, Anderson, Probst and White employees rose in the ranks to take their places as significant designers within the firm. One, **Alfred Phillips Shaw (1895-1970)**, is credited by architectural historian Sally Chappell as the chief architect for the Old Chicago Main Post Office Building. Shaw was born in Dorchester, Massachusetts, and attended St. John's Preparatory School in Danvers, Massachusetts. He received architectural training in an *atelier*, or private architectural studio, run by the Boston Architectural Club.





**Photographs of postal employees working in the Old Chicago Main Post Office Building in 1951 (from Chicago History Museum).**

**Top: Parcel post slide, 6th floor**

**Middle: Primary separation of large flat mail, 8th floor**

**Bottom: Mail sorting machine and the primary separation of mail, 8th floor**





The Old Chicago Main Post Office Building was built to accommodate a future extension of Congress Street west from downtown Chicago. Such an extension was a key street improvement advocated by the Plan of Chicago, and it was achieved in the 1950s by the construction of the Congress (now Eisenhower) Expressway.

Top: Land cleared of buildings in advance of the construction of the Eisenhower Expressway can be seen in this aerial photograph of the Old Chicago Main Post Office Building, looking west (from <https://chicagology.com/skyscrapers/skyscrapers029/>).

Bottom: A circa 1960 photograph of the Expressway where it passes through the building (<http://themanonfive.com/page/6>).



Coming to Chicago, Shaw became an employee of Graham, Anderson, Probst and White sometime in the mid-1920s. He became a junior partner in 1929. Shaw often worked in collaboration with Sigurd Naess, another member of the firm, who took Shaw's basic massing and elevation drawings and translated them into more detailed plans. Upon Graham's death in 1936, Shaw and Naess were let go from the firm, which was struggling in the depths of the Depression. Along with Charles F. Murphy, Graham's long-time assistant, they formed their own firm, Shaw, Naess & Murphy, which was a predecessor firm to several Chicago architectural offices that were prominent in the post-World War II era, including Shaw, Metz and Associates and C.F. Murphy Associates.

Throughout the late 1910s and 1920s, into the early Depression years of the 1930s, Graham, Anderson, Probst & White was one of the top architectural firms in Chicago in the fields of commercial, transportation and institutional architecture. Their commissions include some of the city's most prestigious buildings built during this time, including the Wrigley Building and its north annex, the Continental and Federal Reserve banks, the Shedd Aquarium, the Civic Opera House Building, the Chicago Historical Society, the Pittsfield Building, the Merchandise Mart, Union Station, and the Field Building. They earlier had finished buildings started under Burnham and an earlier successor firm, including the Field Museum. Many of the firm's buildings are designated as individual Chicago Landmarks, are individually listed on the National Register of Historic Places, or are contributing buildings to National Register-listed historic districts. The firm also designed the Corwith manufacturing complex for the Crane Company, once an enormous industrial plant on South Pulaski Road built for a Chicago-based industrial powerhouse, but most of which has since been demolished.

Graham, Anderson, Probst & White were renowned for their ability to manage the design and construction of large-scale, complex buildings with a rail transportation component, both in Chicago and elsewhere, including Washington, D.C.'s Union Station, the Cleveland Terminal group, and the Pennsylvania Railroad Terminal in Philadelphia. The firm was therefore a logical choice as architects for the Old Chicago Main Post Office Building, given its great scale, functional complexity, and spatial integration with underlying railroad tracks.

## **THE LATER HISTORY OF THE OLD CHICAGO MAIN POST OFFICE BUILDING**

The Old Chicago Main Post Office Building remained an organizational and functional marvel through decades of use. The statistics that are associated with the building's use are daunting. For example, the post office was served by dozens of trains daily in the early 1940s, while over 5,000 trucks entered and departed from the building every day. By 1940, Chicago was also served by 75 airmail planes flying in and out of the city every day. For a time in the late 1940s and early 1950s, mail helicopters even used the roof of the building as a landing pad. Such mail helicopters took mail between Chicago and nearby cities such as Waukegan, Aurora, Elgin and Joliet.

The volume of mail processed by the Old Chicago Main Post Office Building required the integration of manpower into a complex pattern of functions that resembled an industrial assembly-line system. The process of mail processing, sorting and delivery as practiced in the Old Chicago Main Post Office during the decades of its use was a combination of human skill and mechanized process. Manual methods and communications competed and coexisted with complex mechanical systems, and the particulars of this combination changed little until the post-World War II era.

Hand processing of mail required a substantial number of line managers to prevent theft and to ensure quality control and discipline. One method used at the Old Chicago Main Post Office Building, as well as elsewhere in the national system, was a feature known as "Stuart's Alley." Named for James E. Stuart, a 1920s-era Chicago postal inspector who invented the system, this post-office feature was a narrow enclosed runway that ran through a sorting or processing floor. Wide enough for only one person, Stuart's Alley was built with sound-proofing and viewing slits that allowed an inspector to pass through a work space observing workers and work flow without being observed or heard in turn. He or she could look from side to side, or, using slits in the floor, look down on employees working below. Such a system allowed inspectors to identify theft or sloth; it also served as a psychological deterrent for workers contemplating misbehavior.

The Old Chicago Main Post Office Building was an important center of employment for Chicagoans, including African Americans. Many were first hired as temporary workers during the Depression, including author Richard Wright. An African American union, the National Alliance of Postal Workers, which was founded in 1911 in St. Louis, challenged prejudice in the post office system. In Chicago, it advocated color-blind job applications for post office jobs and worked to get black workers better jobs within the postal system. The union acquired increasing power until, in 1966, it was instrumental in the promotion of Henry Wadsworth McGee as Postmaster of the Chicago post office and the first African American postmaster of a large metropolitan post office in the United States.

As a nod to the Plan of Chicago hope of a Congress Street extension from the South Loop to Chicago's West Side, the Old Chicago Main Post Office Building was originally constructed with a 40-foot-wide roadway in each direction in the middle of the building. It was intended to provide for three 10-foot-wide through traffic lanes and outer lanes in each direction for traffic entering and leaving the post office. Various plans for such a road extension were floated in the 1930s, but were not acted on before World War II diverted money and attention to war efforts.

Finally, a plan for an expressway linking downtown and the western suburbs was enacted in the 1950s. The resulting Congress (now Eisenhower) Expressway was completed in 1955. Where it passes through the Old Chicago Main Post Office Building, it consists of two 40-foot-wide driving lanes and a pedestrian walk. No provision was made for entering and leaving the post office by car using the expressway, unlike original plans.

Increased mechanization allowed the Post Office to manage ever-greater amounts of mail as the years went by. Despite such efforts, eventually the decision was made to build a new main post office building for Chicago. Constructed on a site just south of the Old Chicago Main Post Office Building, this new central post office building was completed in 1996. The Old Chicago Main Post Office Building subsequently closed. It has remained vacant since. Current plans are for a comprehensive rehabilitation for new use as an office building with associated amenities, including a restored main lobby with retail services, utilizing federal historic preservation tax credits and the Cook County Class L property tax incentive to assist with this rehabilitation.





**Photographs of the main lobby of the Old Chicago Main Post Office Building (Tom Rossiter, photographer).**

**Left: A view of the lobby showing fluted and smooth marble piers and Art Deco-style ceiling light fixtures.**

**Bottom: A view of one of the compass rose patterns decorating the stone floor of the lobby.**





**More details of the lobby (Tom Rossiter, photographer).**

**Top: One of the entrance doors, with a monel metal stylized eagle in the Art Deco style.**

**Right: One of several low-relief bronze panels with ornament related to the building's historic function as a post office.**





## CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION

According to the Municipal Code of Chicago (Sections 2-120-690), the Commission on Chicago Landmarks has the authority to make a final recommendation of landmark designation for an area, district, place, building, structure, work of art or other object with the City of Chicago if the Commission determines it meets two or more of the stated “criteria for designation,” as well as possesses a significant degree of historic integrity to convey its significance.

The following should be considered by the Commission on Chicago Landmarks in determining whether to recommend that the Old Chicago Main Post Office Building be designated as a Chicago Landmark.

### ***Criterion 1: Value as an Example of City, State, or National Heritage***

*Its value as an example of the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social, or other aspect of the heritage of the City of Chicago, the State of Illinois, or the United States.*

- The Old Chicago Main Post Office Building is unique in the historic context of Chicago as the only surviving historic main post office building in Chicago. It is both locally and nationally significant for its role in mail delivery, a primary function of the United States federal government, and it exemplifies locally the significance of the United States Post Office Department to the city, state and nation.
- As the main postal facility for Chicago between 1934 and 1996, the Old Chicago Main Post Office Building made possible efficient and comprehensive mail service for the city and its larger metropolitan area.
- The Old Chicago Main Post Office Building was the nexus of activity for the transport of mail throughout the United States and was critical to communications in the United States in the age before the internet.
- The Old Chicago Main Post Office Building began as a smaller, more modestly-designed United States Mail Building built to facilitate the delivery of parcel post in and through Chicago. Its location over railroad tracks along the west bank of the Chicago River's South Branch allowed ease of integration between postal service activities and the railroads that served this federal department, which continued with the construction of the larger Old Chicago Main Post Office Building.
- The Old Chicago Main Post Office Building, through its location above Near West Side rail tracks and adjacent to Union Station, is one of the most significant buildings that resulted directly from the 1909 Plan of Chicago. As such, it exemplifies the historic importance of this seminal planning document in the economic and architectural history of Chicago.
- The Old Chicago Main Post Office Building is subject to a Preservation Covenant which binds owners of the property to restore, maintain and preserve the property in accordance with the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation of Historic Buildings.

#### ***Criterion 4: Exemplary Architecture***

*Its exemplification of an architectural type or style distinguished by innovation, rarity, uniqueness, or overall quality of design, detail, materials, or craftsmanship.*

- The Old Chicago Main Post Office Building is a grandly-scaled building designed in a modernized Classical variation of the Art Deco architectural style. Federal government buildings had a long tradition of construction in Classical styles. The Main Post Office Building combines modernized Classical ornamentation with sleek, modern forms and detailing to create a building that is a prominent example of modernized Classical / Art Deco-style architecture in Chicago.
- The Old Chicago Main Post Office Building has excellent craftsmanship in stone, glass mosaic and decorative metal, both in its exterior and in its main lobby off Van Buren Street.
- The Old Chicago Main Post Office Building, through its architecture, exemplifies the elaborate mail delivery, sorting and storage processes that made possible mail delivery on the giant scale necessary for twentieth-century Chicago.

#### ***Criterion 5: Important Architect***

*Its identification as the work of an architect, designer, engineer, or builder whose individual work is significant in the history or development of the City of Chicago, the State of Illinois, or the United States.*

- Graham, Anderson, Probst and White, the architect of the Old Chicago Main Post Office Building, was one of the most significant architectural firms working in Chicago in the 1910s and early 1930s. A successor firm to D. H. Burnham & Co., Graham, Anderson, Probst & White was a major designer of large-scale commercial, transportation, institutional and governmental buildings in the city.
- Graham, Anderson, Probst and White designed many architecturally significant buildings, including the Merchandise Mart, the Civic Opera House Building, the Field Building, the Pittsfield Building, the Shedd Aquarium, and the Chicago Historical Society.
- The close integration of below-grade railroad tracks with the Old Chicago Main Post Office Building owed much to Graham, Anderson, Probst and White's experience with railway facilities, having designed major rail stations in Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and Cleveland, as well as Union Station here in Chicago.

#### ***Criterion 7: Unique or Distinctive Visual Feature***

*Its unique location of distinctive physical presence representing an established and familiar visual feature of a neighborhood, community or City of Chicago.*

- The Old Chicago Main Post Office Building is a visual "landmark" on the western edge of downtown Chicago due to its great scale and its location on the western bank of the South Branch of the Chicago River, easily visible from many directions.
- The building is also visually unique with its historic vehicular passage built into the base of the building in 1934 and intended eventually to accommodate a large-scale extension of Congress Street. Built twenty years later, the Eisenhower Expressway now passes through the building,



making the building the de-facto "gateway" to Chicago's Loop for motorists from Chicago's West Side and the western suburbs.

### ***Integrity Criteria***

*The integrity of the proposed landmark must be preserved in light of its location, design, setting, materials, workmanship and ability to express its historic community, architecture or aesthetic interest or value.*

The Old Chicago Main Post Office Building has excellent historic integrity. It retains its original site, overall building form and character-defining exterior and interior details. It retains historic window patterns, openings and sash, as well as historic pedestrian entrances and doors off Van Buren Street.

Inside, the building retains its historic main lobby, comprised of a central hall, elevator lobbies, and connecting lobbies. All of these spaces retain historic spatial volumes, marble-clad walls, decorative-metal and glass-mosaic details and finishes, and patterned stone floors. Historic metal and glass light fixtures also remain. Although much more functional and industrial in character, other portions of the building's interior retain historic circulation patterns and many interior spaces and finishes appropriate to the building's historic postal functions.

Changes to the building include the removal of exterior light fixtures originally flanking the main entrance off Van Buren and the loss and damage suffered to windows, doors and material finishes due to years of non-occupancy.

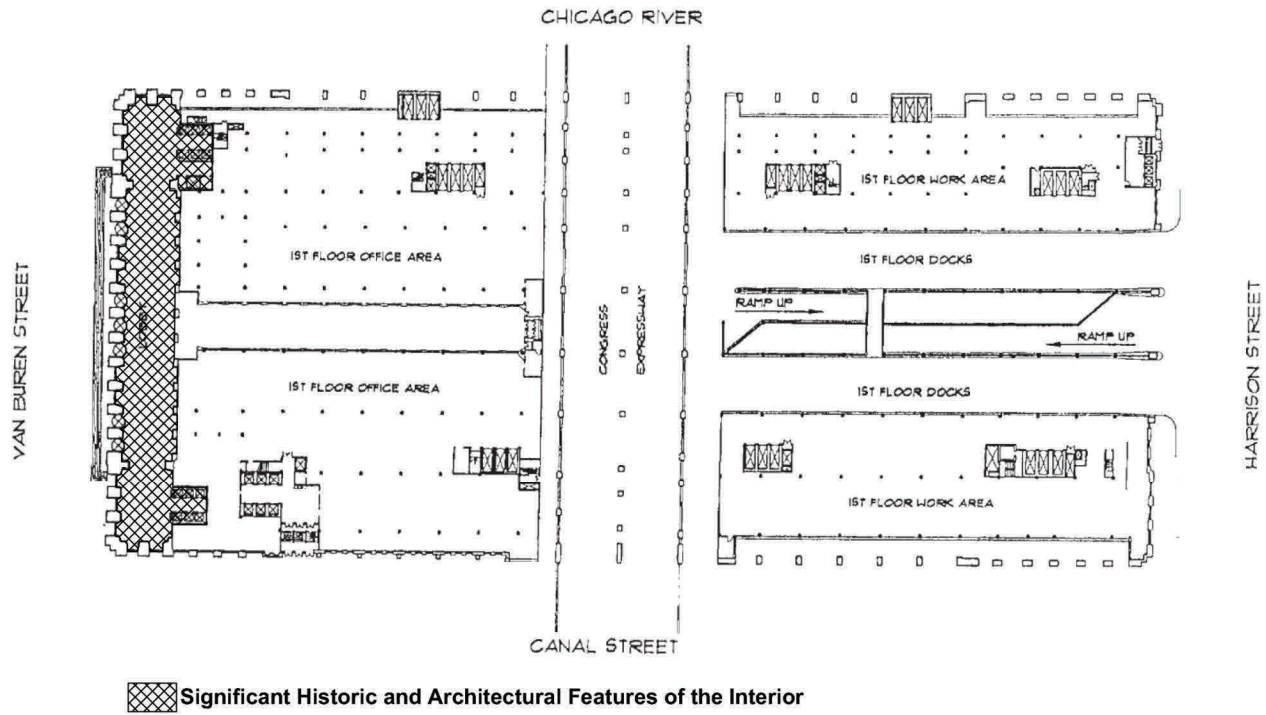
Despite these changes, the Old Chicago Main Post Office Building retains more than sufficient historic integrity for Chicago Landmark designation. As Chicago's sole surviving historic central post office building, the building is unique within the historic context of Chicago history and architecture. The building exemplifies the importance of mail delivery to the citizens and businesses of Chicago. It is one of the most important buildings designed by significant architects Graham, Anderson, Probst & White. It exemplifies the historic importance of the Plan of Chicago to the city's history. Its unique location and accommodation to the Eisenhower Expressway makes it a unique visual "landmark" within the context of Chicago. Its historic and architectural significance has been preserved in light of its location, overall design, setting, materials, workmanship and ability to express its historic and architectural value to the City of Chicago.

## **SIGNIFICANT HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES**

Whenever an area, district, place, building, structure, work of art or other object is under consideration for landmark designation, the Commission on Chicago Landmarks is required to identify the "significant historical and architectural features" of the property. This is done to enable the owners and the public to understand which elements are considered most important to preserve the historical and architectural character of the proposed landmark.

Based upon its preliminary evaluation of the Old Chicago Main Post Office Building, the Commission staff recommends that the significant features be identified as:

- All exterior elevations, including rooflines, of the building; and
- The interior of the Van Buren Street lobby, as depicted and identified on Exhibit PO-1 below.



**Exhibit PO-1**



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