

United States Department of the Interior National Park Service

LISTED 19920511

92000480

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, styles, materials, and areas of significance, enter only the categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900a). Type all entries.

1. Name of Property

historic name Auburn United States Post Office

other names/site number NH01-056

2. Location

street & number 1320 Courthouse Avenue

N/A not for publication

city, town Auburn

N/A vicinity

state Nebraska

code NE

county Nemaha

code 127

zip code 68305

3. Classification

Ownership of Property

- private, public-local, public-State, public-Federal

Category of Property

- building(s), district, site, structure, object

Number of Resources within Property

Table with 2 columns: Contributing, Noncontributing. Rows for buildings, sites, structures, objects, Total.

Name of related multiple property listing: Nebraska Post Offices Which Contain Section Artwork (1938-1942)

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

4. State/Federal Agency Certification

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

Signature of certifying official: Director, Nebraska State Historical Society

Date

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. See continuation sheet.

Signature of commenting or other official

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

5. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby, certify that this property is:

- entered in the National Register. See continuation sheet.
determined eligible for the National Register. See continuation sheet.
determined not eligible for the National Register.
removed from the National Register.
other, (explain:)

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Government/Post Office

Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Government/Post Office

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(enter categories from instructions)

Colonial Revival

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation Concrete

walls Brick

roof Slate

other Limestone

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

The Auburn United States Post Office is located at the northwest corner of 14th Street and Courthouse Avenue in Auburn, the county seat of Nemaha County, in southeastern Nebraska (1990 population: 3,443). The one-story five-bay, red brick Georgian Revival style building, constructed in 1936-37, is an excellent, well-preserved example of a Class C or D small post office built from standardized plans in the 1930's. The nomination also includes three contributing objects: two ornamental lamp posts located on either side of the main entry and a flag pole.

The post office building measures approximately 60 by 61 feet and features a latitudinal gable roof with pedimented gable ends pierced by fanlights and a central wooden cupola. Symmetrical in design, the building has a raised central entrance which features a brick segmental arch, fluted Doric pilasters, entablature, and transom window. An elliptical pediment above the entrance features a stylized aluminum eagle. Two pairs of 12-over-12 paned double sash windows with limestone lintels flank the main entrance; similar fenestration was employed on the north and south facades. Limestone was also used in the belt course and watertable. The rear flat portion of the roof is composition tile while the main facade gable roof is gray and green slate. The building exhibits good integrity; modifications include replacement of the front entry doors and minor interior alterations. Construction of the Auburn Post Office began in the summer of 1936; the building was completed and officially dedicated on August 26, 1937. (Nemaha County Herald, Aug. 19; Aug. 26, 1937)

A mural entitled "Threshing," by Ethel Magafan, is located on the north lobby wall above the postmaster's door which is flanked by wood framed, glass enclosed bulletin boards. The oil-on-canvas mural, which measures 13 feet by 4 feet, occupies the typical space for murals commissioned by the Treasury Department's Section of Fine Arts program in small Class C or D post offices. The commission was awarded to Colorado Springs artist Ethel Magafan in July, 1937, and the completed mural was installed by the artist a year later in June, 1938 (Nemaha County Herald, June 9, 1938). As indicated by its title, the mural depicts a threshing machine in operation with several men engaged in related tasks; it is painted in gold,

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green, and brown tones that emphasize the agricultural landscape and the threshing process.

Compositionally, the threshing machine forms the focal point of the mural although it is located slightly off-center and is partially obscured by a wagon load of wheat pulled by two large work horses and men working with the wheat. The threshing process is depicted from left to right; three men at the left edge of the mural hold pitchforks to lift bundles of golden wheat onto the wagon where a man stands up to his knees in wheat, lifting a bundle on his pitchfork. In the foreground a man rests one foot on the wagon, pitchfork in hand; nearby another man bends to lift a filled grain sack. Wheat chaff swirls from a chute onto a golden mound which forms the right edge of the mural. In front of the chaff mound are the figures of three men and full sacks of grain. The chute frames a view of rolling hills and fields in the distance.

After the mural was installed, the artist submitted a required photograph of the artwork in place and provided a lighting report. Miss Magafan noted that the light in the lobby was "fine" but that the hanging fixtures obscured the mural. According to Section records, the fixtures were replaced sometime later with more appropriate fixtures. Currently the lobby has suspended fluorescent lights flush to the ceiling.

The lobby interior is in excellent condition and retains its original woodwork, terrazzo tile floor and marble wainscotting. Although a varnished wooden vestibule projects into the lobby and partially obscures the mural, it is an original design feature typical of Class C and D standardized post office designs of the 1930's. In 1981 the mural was cleaned and restored by an art conservator under contract with the United States Postal Service; it is in excellent condition.

8. Statement of Significance

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

nationally statewide locally

Applicable National Register Criteria A B C D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions) A B C D E F G

Areas of Significance (enter categories from instructions)

Art
Politics/Government

Period of Significance

1938

Significant Dates

1938

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Significant Person

N/A

Architect/Builder

Magafan, Ethel: Artist

Simon, Louis: Supervising Architect

Rokahr, Ernest: Contractor

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

The Auburn United States Post Office is being nominated to the National Register as part of the Nebraska Post Offices Which Contain Section Artwork (1938-1942) multiple property nomination at the state level of significance under Criterion A for its association with the United States Treasury Department's Section of Fine Arts program (1934-1943) and under Criterion C for the artistic significance of the mural it contains. The Auburn post office mural entitled "Threshing" was painted by Colorado Springs artist Ethel Magafan and installed in June, 1938.

The oil-on-canvas mural, which measures 13 by 4 feet, is located on the lobby wall directly above the postmaster's door in the typical location for murals installed in a Class C or D post office such as Auburn. The mural is an excellent example of artwork commissioned for post offices through the Treasury Department's Section on Fine Arts from 1934-1943. Painted in green, gold, and brown tones, the mural depicts a threshing machine and crew at work. With its theme of local agriculture and the activity of threshing executed in a realistic style, it is an excellent example of government sponsored Regionalism.

On the basis of a design submitted for a Kansas mural competition, Ethel Magafan was offered the Auburn commission in July, 1937. In accordance with established Section procedures to monitor mural quality and content, Superintendent Edward Rowan cited the contract amount, \$620, and payment schedule; one-third upon approval of preliminary sketches; one-third after approval of a full-size cartoon; and the balance after the mural was installed and photographed. Rowan also provided Miss Magafan with building blueprints and dimensions of the mural space, and suggested she visit the post office and locale to develop an appropriate theme.

In July or August 1937, Miss Magafan visited the post office and made several sketches of the area landscape which she submitted along with a color sketch for Section approval. Miss Magafan proposed a threshing scene

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and a Nebraska landscape. She reported to Rowan that wheat threshing was important to the state and would also provide "exciting material for a mural." She also noted that the "beautiful rolling plains" with "patterns and textures [caused] by ploughed earth, corn and wheat fields" would also be appropriate. In September 1937, the Section approved the sketches for the threshing theme and notified Miss Magafan to proceed with a projected completion date of May 31, 1938.

The Auburn post office mural was completed according to schedule. Miss Magafan hung the completed mural in early June 1938, assisted by her twin sister Jenne Magafan and Edward Chávez, who painted murals for the Albion and Geneva, Nebraska, post offices. The Nemaha County Herald reported that the mural was developed from actual sketches of the area countryside and depicted a "scene that is still common, although disappearing with the increased use of the combine" (June 9, 1938).

In March, 1938, several women from an Auburn art class had written to Section officials to suggest themes for the proposed mural. Rowan informed them that the mural design had already been selected but that he was certain they would approve of the finished product. In July, 1938, one of the women wrote to the Section to express their appreciation of the mural: "A better subject could not have been chosen (sic) for the old threshing machine is rapidly going out of use and inside of another generation it will be a thing of the past." The women recommended that Miss Magafan be considered for other commissions and praised the Auburn mural: "Someday it may be as popular as the one so recently painted by Grant Wood--Dinner for Threshers" (National Archives Record Group 121, Entry 133 Box 61).

Ethel Magafan, along with Edward Chávez and her twin sister Jenne, studied under Frank Mechau at the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center. In the early 1930's the Magafans and Chávez assisted Mechau with WPA Federal Art project murals; each of the artists received a Section commission for a Nebraska post office. Ethel Magafan also received commissions for post office murals in Arkansas (1940); Oklahoma (1941) and Colorado (1942), the Recorder of Deeds Building; the Senate Chambers; and with her sister Jenne, the Social Security Building; all in Washington, D.C. Recipient of a Fulbright grant, Ethel also served as artist-in-resident at the University of Georgia and Syracuse University. Her work is part of the permanent collections of institutions such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the National Museum of American Art and the Denver Art Museum.

For additional information, refer to the Nebraska Post Offices Which Contain Section Artwork (1938-1942) multiple property form.

9. Major Bibliographical References

Falk, Peter Hastings. Who Was Who in American Art. (Madison, CT: Soundview Press, 1985).

Gilbert, Dorothy B., ed. Who's Who in American Art. Vol. IV: 1940-1947. (Washington, D.C.: American Federation of Arts, 1947).

Marling, Karal Ann. Wall-to-Wall America. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota press, 1982).

National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C. Record Group 121: Preliminary Inventory of the Records of the Public Building Service. Entry 133: Case Files Concerning Embellishments of Federal Buildings, 1934-1943. Box 61: Nebraska.

See continuation sheet

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 # _____

Primary location of additional data:

- State historic preservation office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Specify repository: _____

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of property Less than one acre.

UTM References

A

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Zone Easting Northing

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Zone Easting Northing

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See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

The property is described as Lots 7, 8, 9, and 10, Block 8, Howe, Nixon & Wilson's addition to Auburn, Nemaha County, Nebraska.

See continuation sheet

Boundary Justification

The boundary includes that parcel of land which has historically been associated with the property.

See continuation sheet

11. Form Prepared By

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Nemaha County Herald. Aug. 19, 26, 1937; June 9, 1938.

Optiz, Glenn B., ed. Mantle Fielding's Dictionary of American Painters, Sculptors & Engravers. (Poughkeepsie, NY: Apollo, 1986).

Park, Marlene and Gerald Markowitz. Democratic Vistas. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984).

Pikes Peak Vision: The Broadmoor Art Academy, 1919-1945. Exhibit Catalog. Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, 1989.

Whiffen, Marcus. American Architecture Since 1780: A Guide to the Styles, (Cambridge, MA: The M.I.T. Press, 1969).



Photo 1 of 3
View looking SW showing N & E facades
Photo by Jeffrey Bebee, Oct 1989, NSHS (H673.5-4855)



Photo 2 of 3
Interior view looking N showing lobby & mural (*Threshing*, oil on canvas by Ethel Magafan, 1938)
Photo by Jeffrey Bebee, Oct 1989, NSHS (H673.5-4856)



Photo 3 of 3
Interior view looking N showing mural (*Threshing*, oil on canvas by Ethel Magafan, 1938)
Photo by Jeffrey Bebee, Oct 1989, NSHS (H673.5-4857)