

**NOMINATION OF THE WEIS COURTHOUSE
TO BE DESIGNATED AS A CITY HISTORIC LANDMARK**

CITY COUNCIL REPORT



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WEIS COURTHOUSE - HISTORIC NOMINATION STAFF REPORT

Name of Property The Weis Courthouse
Address of Property 700 Grant Street
Property Owner Ms. Donna Andrews
Nominated by: Matthew Falcone
Date Received: July 12, 2019
Parcel No.: 2-B-39
Ward: 2nd
Zoning Classification: GT-B
Neighborhood: Central Business District
Council District: 6-Lavelle

FORMAL ACTION REQUIRED BY THE HISTORIC REVIEW COMMISSION:

1. Act on the Preliminary Determination of Eligibility for Historic Designation (7 August 2019)
2. Conduct a public hearing for the Historic Designation (4 September 2019)
3. Review the Report prepared by staff for the property in question, and make a recommendation to the City Council on the Historic Designation (4 September 2019)

FORMAL ACTION REQUIRED BY THE PLANNING COMMISSION:

4. Conduct a public hearing for the Historic Designation (8 October 2019)
5. Review the recommendations of the Historic Review Commission and make a recommendation to the City Council on the Historic Designation (8 October 2019)

FORMAL ACTION REQUIRED BY THE CITY COUNCIL:

6. Conduct a public hearing
7. Review the recommendations of the Historic Review Commission and the City Planning Commission and take action on the Historic Designation

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FACTS

1. On July 12, 2019 the staff of the Historic Review Commission received an application for the nomination of The Weis Courthouse to be designated as a City Historic Structure.
2. **Description of The Weis Courthouse** (*as extracted from the nomination form*)

The U.S. Courthouse is a monumental, ten-story building occupying a full city block on the east side of Grant Street between Seventh Avenue and what is now the Martin Luther King Jr. East Busway. To the rear, the property is bounded by the former Pennsylvania Railroad tracks, which run in an open cut below grade level en route to the Panhandle Tunnel. The building footprint is almost rectangular, though a portion of the east side angles outward to follow the curve of the railroad tracks. The building is approximately 525 by 145 feet, extending to 190 feet at the north end. It is of steel frame construction with stone cladding.

Spatially, the building is organized into two main volumes: a four-story base, which occupies the full site, and a six-story upper section which is set back about 85 feet on the north and south sides. The fifth floor extends over the lower volume but is set back about 8 feet behind the cornice line, giving it a reduced visual presence. Similarly, the tenth floor is set back above the cornice line of the upper section. The building has four interior light courts starting at the fourth floor, two in the central section which serve floors 4–10, and two in the base which serve only the fourth and fifth floors. The two light courts in the upper section were originally open to the east side starting at the fifth floor, giving the upper floors an E plan conforming to the large courtrooms inside. In 2001–06, the light courts were filled in with a glass-walled addition containing additional courtroom space. The entire building rests on a raised basement level whose height above grade varies from a full story at the north end of the building to only a few feet at the southeast corner on Seventh Avenue.

Grant Street facade

The main facade of the building faces Grant Street. It is symmetrically organized around two large, subtly projecting entrance pavilions which extend the full height of the building and are capped with pyramidal hipped roofs. Projecting cornices above the fourth and ninth floors divide the facade into two sections with contrasting treatments. The lower volume is dominated by 13 two-story arched windows with ornamental bronze grilles, which are divided into a 2–9–2 grouping by the two entrance bays. Each of the three sets of arched windows is flanked by one bay on either side consisting of single-story rectangular windows. Smaller rectangular windows continue on the third and fourth floors and are aligned with the arched windows on a 2:1 basis.

The upper volume is vertically oriented with eleven bays separated by pilasters. Each bay has a triple-height window spanning the sixth through eighth floors, enhancing the sense of verticality, with verd antique spandrel panels separating the floors. Single-story windows are used on the fifth and ninth floors. The bays of the upper volume, like those on the third and fourth floors, are aligned with the arched windows on the lower floors. The pilasters are minimally adorned with simple plinths and capitals and each has a decorative roundel placed above. The entrance bay sections each have a single large triple-height window with a bronze grille spanning the sixth through eighth floors and a small, pedimented window on the fifth floor, flanked by two pilasters on each side.

The raised basement level is faced with Maine granite up to the bottom of the arched windows and topped with a semicircular molding. The granite section is punctuated by 13 small rectangular windows, which are aligned with the arched windows above, and two small subsidiary entrances. The remainder of the building is clad in Indiana limestone, with smooth-faced rustication on the first three floors and plain surfaces elsewhere. The two main entrances on Grant Street are set in large arched openings which are of a similar

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height to the arched windows and have the same type of bronze grillwork. The entrance doors are set in between fluted pilasters in an ornamental surround capped by a bronze eagle and shield motif. Larger eagles also appear at the top of each entrance archway. A frieze panel just below the cornice carries the inscription “Post Office and Courts of the United States of America” along with ornamental sculpted elements drawing on classical symbolism: the sword and scales of justice, the caduceus, representing service, and the fasces, the symbol of judicial authority.

Other facades

The north, south, and east facades have the same arrangement of stone cladding as the front and generally continue similar fenestration patterns. The south elevation, facing Seventh Avenue, is symmetrical and has an entrance archway identical to those facing Grant Street, though without the frieze, flanked by one arched window on either side. This entrance opens onto the space which formerly housed a branch post office until 2014. The grade level along Seventh Avenue slopes upward so that only a few feet of the basement level are exposed at the rear.

The north facade continues the fenestration pattern of the main facade with seven of the arched windows. The raised basement is largely windowless but does contain, toward the rear, the portal through which trains originally entered the building. Since the removal of the train tracks in the 1970s it has been closed off into individual parking entrances. Just beyond the north wall of the building is a ramp leading to the sub-basement parking level.

The rear elevation faces the railroad tracks and, further up the hill, Bigelow Boulevard. It has two arched windows at the south end, with paired rectangular windows used elsewhere. The upper part of the facade is split into three sections because of the building’s E shape but is otherwise similar to the front with triple-height windows on the sixth through eighth floors separated by pilasters. In between the three wings of the E are glass-walled additions built into the light courts during the 2001–06 alterations. At ground level, a ramp leads from Seventh Avenue up to a parking and loading dock area which is positioned above the railroad tracks and opens onto the second floor. The east façade, which faces the M.L.K. Jr. Busway, largely reflects the composition of the west façade although a series of seven arched-windowed openings take the place of the large arched entranceway.

Interior

The interior of the building contains ten above-grade floors, three below-grade floors, and a penthouse. The space was historically divided into two main uses: the post office, occupying floors 1–3 as well as the track-level basement, and the courthouse and federal office facilities on floors 4–10. In the lower section of the building, the most notable interior spaces are the north and south entrance lobbies, which open onto Grant Street at the basement level, and the first-floor hallway which was originally the post office waiting area. The south lobby has a maximum height of almost three full stories, with a high groin-vaulted ceiling over the entrance doorway and lower coffered ceilings elsewhere. The walls are faced with pink Alabama marble with decorative pilasters and dentil courses, and several original light fixtures are present. At the rear of the lobby, a first-floor hallway with an ornate groin-vaulted terra-cotta ceiling with gold leaf trim is visible overhead. Once covered by an acoustical tile drop ceiling, the original ceiling was restored during the 2001–06 renovations and part of the hallway floor was cut away to give a better view of the ceiling from the lobby.

In the upper part of the building, the most notable interior spaces are the five original ceremonial courtrooms—Courtrooms 4 and 6 on the sixth floor, and Courtrooms 1, 2, and 3 on the eighth floor. Each courtroom spans two stories, with upper galleries on the sides, and contains original Circassian walnut paneling, built-in wooden furnishings, and decorative plaster ceilings. Fine architectural details are also present in the judges’ chambers and jury rooms, which contain paneled walls, decorative moldings and ceilings, fireplaces, and other features. Two notable 1930s murals are also present in the courtrooms: *Steel*

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Industry by Howard Cook in Courtroom 1, and *Pittsburgh Panorama* by Stuyvesant Van Veen in Courtroom 3. Several other, smaller courtrooms were added between the 1950s and 1970s and typically contain more modern finishes with wood veneer paneling and acoustical tile ceilings.

Other notable interior spaces in the building include original corridors and stair and elevator lobbies, which are typically finished with marble wainscoting, bronze handrails, terrazzo floors, and plaster walls and ceilings. Original doors, window frames, sashes, and bronze grilles remain throughout the building. Many of the interior office spaces were refinished with modern materials during the mid to late 20th century, often obscuring or removing original finishes.

3. History of The Weis Courthouse (as extracted from the nomination form)

In 1926, President Coolidge signed into law the Public Buildings Act, which authorized funding for new federal buildings throughout the country. The following year, Pittsburgh was identified as one of 120 cities in which new government buildings should be constructed. Specifically, the city was in need of a new post office. The existing facility, a five-story granite building at Fourth Avenue and Smithfield Street, had taken a decade to build and was too small almost as soon as it opened in 1891. Since then, the city's population had more than doubled. After the post office began accepting parcels in 1913, the old building was unable to deal with the increase in mail volume and a second facility, the Ferry Street Terminal, had to be established to handle the parcel post and other lower priority mail. This situation was both inefficient and expensive, as the government had to pay \$76,000 annually to lease the eight-story terminal building.

A report by the Joint Commission on Postal Service in 1922 described the situation:

The main office has been found to be much overcrowded, but a measure of temporary relief has been afforded by the lease of a building known as the Ferry Street Station. The relief afforded, however, is not more than temporary, and there is necessity for the erection here of another post-office building to provide for the growth not only of the post office but other Federal bureaus and departments, numerous of which are now paying money rental owing to lack of space in the Government buildings.

Fortunately there is an appropriation available for the acquisition of a site, and the site for which provision has been made meets every requirement of the Postal Service. It is strategically located both as to the Pennsylvania Railroad (in fact, it is part of the station property of that company) and to the business center of the city. The Pennsylvania Railroad transports 75 per cent of all the mail arriving and departing at Pittsburgh, and direct track connections are practicable with the proposed site, with ample room for the loading and reloading of cars in the basement of the proposed building on track level.

Local leaders were well aware of the issues with the existing facilities. In fact, serious efforts to build a new post office had begun as early as 1906. In 1919, after various false starts, the U.S. government bought part of the site described in the Sterling report for \$950,000. At the time, the property was occupied by the old freight warehouse of the Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Chicago and St. Louis Railroad, more commonly known as the Panhandle Route. Part of the building was demolished in 1925 when Grant Street was realigned to remove a discontinuity in the roadway at Seventh Avenue. The additional property, also owned by the Pennsylvania Railroad, was purchased in 1926 for \$1.2 million, bringing the total land cost to just over \$2 million.

In 1927, it was announced that a new \$3 million post office had been approved for Pittsburgh. The initial plan was for a five-story structure which would house only postal facilities, with the federal courts and other departments remaining in the old building. Reportedly, concern over noise from the train station was one of the main factors in this decision. The modest scale of the proposal came as a disappointment to members of the Chamber of Commerce, who were hoping for "a different sort of structure—one symbolic of

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Pittsburgh's progress and industrial importance." Victorian buildings like the old post office were decidedly out of fashion by the 1920s and did not project the modern image the city's business leaders wanted. As a compromise, federal officials planned to give the building a reinforced foundation which would allow for additional stories to be added in the future.

Fortunately for the concerned businessmen, Representative Stephen G. Porter shared their sentiments and was able to lobby the Treasury Department for a more imposing edifice. By December 1927, it was being reported that new building would house all of the city's federal offices in one place, as the Chamber of Commerce hoped: "the internal revenue office, the immigration service, department of justice, prohibition enforcement organization, United States marshal and the Federal courts" in addition to the post office. In order to accommodate the change of plans, the building would be expanded by several stories, and soundproofing would be added in order to protect the courtrooms from outside noise. The commission for the building's design was awarded to the New York architectural firm of Trowbridge & Livingston, best known for its stately Neoclassical designs for prominent financial institutions like J.P. Morgan & Company. This decision was probably influenced by Treasury Secretary Andrew W. Mellon, a Pittsburgh native who had worked with the firm previously on the Mellon National Bank Building (1924). The architects began preparing preliminary sketches in 1928, and an appropriation of \$6.4 million was authorized for construction of the building.

Even though funding and a site had been secured, it took several years for the project to get under way, much to the agitation of city business leaders. With the onset of the Great Depression, Mellon and President Hoover sought to speed up government building programs in order to boost employment. The architects' plans still had not been finalized, so the Treasury Department decided to take separate bids on the foundation in order to get the project started faster. Even still, it was not until March 16, 1931, that construction finally began. The Booth & Flinn Company of Pittsburgh won the contract to build the foundation, a formidable task (requiring excavations up to 90 feet deep) which was not made any easier by a strike lasting from April to June. Nevertheless, the project was ready to move on to the next phase by the end of the year.

The contract for constructing the building itself was awarded to the Aronberg-Fried Company, of New York. Work began with erection of the steel frame, followed by pouring the concrete floors and then putting the stone into place for the exterior walls. The beginning of the stone work was marked by a ceremony to lay the granite cornerstone on July 8, 1932. Former U.S. Representative James Francis Burke was allowed to do the honors, in recognition of the fact that he had been the first to request funding for a new post office back in 1907. Although construction of the new building proceeded smoothly at first, it was soon delayed by a succession of strikes, walkouts, and other labor disputes that halted the work for more than six months in total. Nevertheless, the building continued to rise, and its exterior was substantially finished by the spring of 1933 as seen in a photo published in the *Post-Gazette*. Once the exterior walls and roof were completed, it took another year to finish the inside of the building. The U.S. Post Office and Courthouse was officially dedicated at 10:30 a.m. on October 13, 1934, with several thousand in attendance despite the chilly, windy weather. Postmaster General James Farley, a Roosevelt appointee and the president's former campaign manager, traveled to Pittsburgh to deliver the keynote address, arriving fashionably late to an approximation of a ticker tape parade—"a shower of torn newspapers and telephone directories [coming] down from adjoining office buildings." With the midterm elections (which would be the first referendum on Roosevelt's New Deal policies) just a few weeks away, the event could not escape becoming politicized. Republican Senator David A. Reed, no doubt hoping to bolster his own reelection bid, had issued a statement earlier in the week accusing Farley and the Democrats of unfairly trying to take credit for the project and not doing enough to help Pennsylvanians. Farley was unable to resist responding to this provocation in his dedicatory address, issuing a withering rebuke which the *Pittsburgh Press* reported had a "bombshell-like effect" on those in attendance. (Reed was not reelected.) After Farley's speech, the Post Office was accepted on behalf

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of the city by Mayor William McNair. The public was then invited inside, where they were shown around by 150 uniformed postal service employees and viewed displays illustrating various activities of the federal government.

The new building was the largest structure in downtown Pittsburgh, with around 600,000 square feet of floor space and room for 3,000 employees. The Pittsburgh Press reported that the building contained 15,000 tons of steel, 60,000 cubic yards of concrete—enough to build a sidewalk from Pittsburgh to Wheeling—and over 16,000 stone blocks, along with 1,126 doors and 1,200 windows. level was connected directly to the railroad, with four tracks allowing 28 rail cars to be loaded or unloaded simultaneously, and the rear loading dock had room for 47 mail trucks. An elaborate system of chutes and conveyors allowed mail to be moved quickly from floor to floor. In an effort to keep the mail secure, the building also had a network of tunnels allowing hidden postal inspectors to watch the employees below—even in the washrooms.

The process of moving some 40 federal agencies into the building lasted more than a month. The postal service moved into its quarters in late November, followed by the U.S. District Court a month later after the conclusion of its November term. The last agency to move was the Internal Revenue Service, which waited until January in order to avoid transporting records that were set for disposal at the end of the second quarter. Other tenants covered a wide spectrum of government agencies, including the Public Health Service, Customs Service, Secret Service, Bureau of Narcotics, Veterans Administration, Division of Investigation (FBI), Immigration and Naturalization Service, Army Corps of Engineers, Weather Bureau, Bureau of Ordnance, Chemical Warfare Service, Interstate Commerce Commission, Civil Service Commission, and Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce. The building also housed the headquarters of the 99th Infantry Division Reserves as well as offices associated with the courts including the U.S. Attorney, U.S. Marshals, and federal probation officer.

In 1935, three large 20-by-10-foot murals were commissioned for the courtrooms on the eighth floor. A contest was held to select the artwork, with the winning designs chosen by a local committee and then sent to the Treasury Department's Section of Painting and Sculpture for final approval. About 40 entries were received. For Courtroom 1, the committee selected *Steel Industry* by Howard Cook of Taos, New Mexico. The painting depicted several of the key steps in steelmaking, beginning with ore and coal mining in the lower section and moving on to the smelting and open hearth processes, ingot pouring, and rolling operations in the upper part. Cook based the workers in the painting on drawings he had made during his travels in the American South. He decided to add a layer of complexity to the project by executing it as a fresco, painting directly on the wall using techniques he had studied in Mexico. This restricted him to working on the mural while court was out of session and also meant that he needed to hire a plasterer, which he paid for out of pocket since the artists received a flat rate of \$3,283.33 with no expenses included. Cook's commitment to craft impressed the Section officials, and his work was selected as the best mural of 1937 by the Architectural League of New York.

Local artist and Carnegie Tech professor Kindred McLeary's piece *Modern Justice* was chosen for Courtroom 2. Now lost, the painting depicted "a dramatic, pale, large-scale figure of Justice, a sword held in her right hand as if ready to cut down the anti-social members of society, massed on the left-hand side of the panel, while on the side of the scales in her left hand are clustered the workers, producers, the genuinely social members of the community." The painting was reportedly removed from the courtroom in the early 1950s after falling off the wall in the middle of a trial. A search was conducted in 1978, but failed to locate either the mural or anyone who remembered what had happened to it. The building was thoroughly searched again during the renovations in 2001–06, including removing the plaster behind the judge's bench, but no evidence of McLeary's painting was discovered.

For the third mural, the local committee selected *Death and Life* by 24-year-old Stuyvesant Van Veen of New York, but his depiction of Justice "befuddled" by an intractable class struggle (with socialism

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suggested as the solution) was deemed too radical by the government representatives. Van Veen was invited to modify the design, but instead chose to submit a new work, *Pittsburgh Panorama*, which depicted the city framed by the Westinghouse Memorial Bridge. This design was accepted, though unbeknownst to the officials, Van Veen had still managed to get the last word by subtly shaping the Monongahela River and the steel mills on its banks to resemble a hammer and sickle. After receiving the contract, he spent more than a year completing the work, much to the irritation of the Section officials as the other two murals had already been in place for some time. They were even more annoyed when Van Veen took it upon himself to deliver and install the finished painting personally, without government approval, and only notified them after the fact with a flippant telegram. Nevertheless, he was paid for his work and it remained in place.

Besides the addition of the murals, the building saw relatively few changes during the pre-war era, though various agencies were shuffled in and out as the federal government presence in Pittsburgh continued to expand. Between 1955 and 1970, a variety of alterations were made to the upper floors including the addition of several smaller courtrooms to accommodate the growing needs of the District Court. Air conditioning was installed in the building in 1963. A year later, several agencies including the Weather Bureau and Internal Revenue Service moved across the street to the newly completed, 23-story Federal Building, while the Food and Drug Administration took over the space on the 10th floor vacated by the Weather Bureau.

The lower floors continued to house the Post Office until 1983, though the downtown location, ideal for deliveries by train, was not so convenient in the era of truck-based service. The train tracks were removed from the basement in 1974 and it was converted to an additional parking area. Eventually the

Post Office moved to a new facility on the North Side, although a smaller branch office remained in operation until 2014. The departure of the Post Office left a large section of the building vacant, which was ultimately built out as additional office space between 1988 and 1991. Work on the fourth floor was evidently not completed, as it was reportedly still in a gutted condition in 2000.

The building saw its largest modifications yet in 2001–06, when an \$87 million renovation and expansion was completed by Shalom Baranes Associates. Part of the project involved filling in the existing light courts on the east side of the building with a 32,000-square-foot, glass-walled addition containing six new double-height courtrooms. The north and south lobbies were also renovated, and the south lobby was expanded with a cutout added to the ceiling to reveal the groin-vaulted terra cotta tile ceiling of the hallway above. In 2015, the building was renamed in honor of Joseph F. Weis Jr. (1923–2014), a Pittsburgh native and recently deceased Senior Judge on the 3rd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.

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4. Significance of The Weis Courthouse *(as extracted from the nomination form)*

The *Pittsburgh Code of Ordinances, Title 11, Historic Preservation, Chapter 1: Historic Structures, Districts, Sites and Objects* lists ten criteria, at least one of which must be met for Historic Designation. The nominator is of the opinion that The Weis Courthouse meets several of the criteria as follows.

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

The U.S. Courthouse is one of Pittsburgh's best works of late Neoclassical architecture, exemplifying the transition from traditional to modern building forms during the early to middle part of the 20th century. While the design consciously evokes Classical traditions with its orderly, symmetrical stone facade, it also looks to the future with modern steel-frame construction and Art Deco design elements. The building is characterized by a very high quality of design, materials, and workmanship; the *Pittsburgh Press* reported upon its completion that it was "designed to last for centuries," and it remains in excellent condition today.

Neoclassical architecture in the United States reached its peak between 1890 and 1915, and remained popular especially for large public buildings through the 1930s (the National Gallery in Washington, D.C., completed in 1941, is often regarded as the one of the last major examples). Like the Beaux-Arts style, it was based on design principles espoused by the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris, which drew on Greek and Roman traditions while emphasizing symmetrical, hierarchical forms. Both styles were popularized in the U.S. in large part by the "White City" created by Daniel Burnham et al. for the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Compared to Beaux-Arts buildings, those in the Neoclassical style are distinguished by a more restrained ornamentation, less frequent use of projecting and recessed wall surfaces, and simpler rooflines.

The U.S. Courthouse was designed in the mid-1930s at the tail end of the Neoclassical style's popularity, a transitional period when Art Deco was beginning to take over as the style of choice for large public buildings. As such, the building exemplifies a sparer, more modern manifestation of the Neoclassical style, sometimes referred to as "Stripped Classical." The building's design conveys a sense of dignity through the use of high-quality materials and elegant simplicity rather than ornate decoration. Columns, a staple of classical architecture, do not appear, but are suggested by pilasters and an arcade of arched windows. Art Deco influences can be seen as well, particularly the use of setbacks, the strong vertical lines of the upper volume, and the stylized ornamentation.

Stylistically comparable buildings in Pittsburgh include the Allegheny County Office Building (1931), Mellon Institute (1937), and Buhl Planetarium (1939), as well as earlier structures like the City-County Building (1917) and Trowbridge & Livingston's own Mellon National Bank Building (1924), though none matches the scale of the U.S. Courthouse. It is an impressive work of architecture.

4. Its identification as the work of an architect, designer, engineer, or builder whose individual work is significant in the history of development of the City of Pittsburgh, the State of Pennsylvania, the Mid-Atlantic region, or the United States;

The U.S. Courthouse is a notable work by Trowbridge & Livingston, one of New York City's best-known architectural firms during the early 20th century. The Courthouse is one of three notable commissions the firm completed in Pittsburgh, along with the Mellon National Bank Building (1924) and Gulf Building (1932). All three structures are unique in scale and style; the Mellon Bank is Neoclassical, the Gulf Building is boldly Art Deco, and the Courthouse represents a transition between the two. The Courthouse is particularly notable as one of the few large public buildings designed by the firm; the other most notable example is the Oregon State Capitol (1938).

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Trowbridge & Livingston was established in 1894 by Samuel Beck Parkman Trowbridge (1862–1925) and Goodhue Livingston (1867–1951). The firm was known for their Neoclassical designs, which earned them a number of prestigious commissions in New York like the St. Regis Hotel (1904), Bankers Trust Building (1912), and J.P. Morgan Building (1913). The latter two buildings, both located at the intersection of Wall Street and Broad Street, were iconic designs which were synonymous with their respective financial institutions. The J.P. Morgan Building in particular was so

well known that its owners did not feel the need to provide any exterior signage. No doubt hoping to emulate these prestigious Wall Street firms, Andrew Mellon commissioned Trowbridge & Livingston in 1922 to design the headquarters for his own Mellon National Bank, in collaboration with his nephew Edward Mellon. Later, as Treasury Secretary, Mellon likely influenced the Treasury Department's decision to hire the same firm for the Courthouse project.

7. Its association with important cultural or social aspects or events in the history of the City of Pittsburgh, the State of Pennsylvania, the Mid-Atlantic region, or the United States;

The U.S. Courthouse is significant due to its association with Depression-era federal work relief programs enacted by Presidents Herbert Hoover and Franklin D. Roosevelt. Roosevelt's New Deal programs especially were of unprecedented scope and impact, putting people to work on a huge variety of public works projects that reshaped the built landscape in cities and towns throughout the United States. The Courthouse is part of the enduring legacy of these programs.

Construction of the building began in 1931 as a federal work relief project under the Hoover administration. Hoover, like Roosevelt, believed public works projects would boost employment and stimulate the economy. However, he was also firmly committed to keeping a balanced budget and was not willing to significantly increase government spending on new projects. Since the Pittsburgh building was already funded, Hoover and Treasury Secretary Andrew Mellon worked to get it started as quickly as possible. Although Hoover did eventually authorize an increase in public works spending, his efforts were dwarfed by the massive New Deal programs enacted after Roosevelt took office in 1933. For this reason, examples of completed federal relief projects dating to the Hoover administration are relatively rare.

The Courthouse project employed more than 400 workers during its three years of construction, though the work was halted several times by strikes and other labor disputes. It also stimulated the Pittsburgh economy indirectly through the use of locally produced steel, glass, and aluminum.⁴³ The building required 15,000 tons of structural steel, enough to keep its supplier, the Fort Pitt Bridge Company, operating for three months. The end result of the project, in addition to the obvious economic benefit, was an attractive and functional building the community could take pride in. With the huge expansion of federal public works spending under Roosevelt, similar projects would be undertaken throughout the United States, leaving a substantial built legacy that endures to the present.

Although the building itself was not a New Deal project, it is associated with the New Deal through the two courtroom murals created in 1936–37 under the auspices of the Treasury Department's Section of Painting and Sculpture. Established in 1934, the Section was one of four New Deal arts programs which provided work for American artists while bringing cultural enrichment to the public via high-quality art installations. Unlike the other programs, the Section did not award commissions based on need, but selected artworks via open competition with the goal of finding the best work for each space. It commissioned more than 1,400 murals and sculptures which were installed in post offices and other public buildings throughout the country.

The two murals in the U.S. Courthouse are *Steel Industry* by Howard Cook (1901–1980) and *Pittsburgh Panorama* by Stuyvesant Van Veen (1910–1988). Both artists are well known for their mural work and completed other New Deal commissions in addition to the Courthouse paintings. Cook's mural, depicting

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steelworkers and miners at work in Pittsburgh’s most famous industry, is a fresco which he painted directly on the courtroom wall using techniques he had studied in Mexico. As Mexican artists like Diego Rivera were leading the field of mural painting at the time, this training gave Cook’s work an authenticity that was valued by the Section. *Steel Industry* was recognized as a significant work upon its completion and was awarded a Gold Medal by the Architectural League of New York as the best mural of 1937. Afterward, Cook was able to capitalize on his growing reputation with a number of other large projects including the well-known San Antonio Post Office murals.

Van Veen’s mural, a stylized depiction of the city framed by the Westinghouse Bridge, is a second design which he created after his original entry, *Death and Life*, was found too radical by Section officials. The artist expressed his anger over the situation by subtly concealing a hammer and sickle motif in the revised artwork, reflecting his socialist sympathies. Prior to creating the mural, Van Veen had established a reputation as something of a prodigy, becoming the youngest artist to show a painting in the Carnegie Institute’s prestigious Annual Exhibition at age 19. However, the Section officials found him difficult to work with and refused to give him any further commissions, which prevented him from reaching the same career heights as Cook. Despite this, he was still recognized as a skilled muralist during his lifetime and was honored with a membership in the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1972.

The two Courthouse murals are part of a legacy of 94 artworks in Pennsylvania commissioned by the Section between 1934 and 1943. Not all of these works have survived; in fact, a third mural in the

U.S. Courthouse is among those no longer extant. Of the Pennsylvania commissions, only one other mural is located in Pittsburgh: *History of Squirrel Hill* (1942) by Alan Thompson, installed in the Squirrel Hill Post Office. Therefore, the Courthouse murals are an important part of Pittsburgh’s New Deal legacy.

10. Its unique location and distinctive physical appearance or presence representing an established and familiar visual feature of a neighborhood, community, or the City of Pittsburgh;

Occupying a full city block on Grant Street, one of downtown Pittsburgh’s busiest and most architecturally distinguished corridors, the U.S. Courthouse is a well-established landmark of the surrounding area. Once downtown’s largest building, the Courthouse conveys a feeling of the established presence and influence of the federal government in Pittsburgh, which is strengthened by two other current and former federal buildings on the opposite side of Grant Street.

8. Integrity

Location

The building retains a high degree of integrity of location, as it occupies its original site at Grant Street and Seventh Avenue.

Design

The exterior of the building exhibits a high integrity of design. The largest change to the exterior of the building was the construction of two infill additions inside the light courts on the east side of the building in 2001–06. While these glass-walled additions are of undeniably modern construction, they harmonize with the existing building and do not detract from its overall appearance. In addition, they are only visible from the rear of the building. Other minor alterations include closing in the portal on the north side of the building where trains once entered the basement, and installation of air handling equipment on the roof. With these exceptions, the exterior of the building remains almost exactly as designed by Trowbridge & Livingston.

The integrity of the building’s interior is moderate to low, though some of the most important spaces retain their original appearance—especially the five ceremonial courtrooms on the sixth and eighth floors.

**NOMINATION OF THE WEIS COURTHOUSE
TO BE DESIGNATED AS A CITY HISTORIC LANDMARK**

CITY COUNCIL REPORT

Many of the lobby, hallway, and stairwell areas also retain their original designs. However, much of the interior office space has been altered and reorganized during the building's history.

Setting

The building retains moderately high integrity of setting. It maintains its historical relationship with the Pennsylvania Railroad Station, though the train tracks that once connected the two buildings have been removed, and an underground tunnel has been closed off. The streets, ramps, and railroad tracks around the building retain their original alignments. The adjacent streetscape along Grant Street also retains considerable integrity, with many neighboring buildings remaining from the Courthouse's original period of construction including the Gulf Building (1932), Federal Reserve Building (1931), and Koppers Building (1929). The presence of the William S. Moorhead Federal Building (1964) along with the Courthouse and the Federal Reserve Building conveys a strong feeling of the historical presence of the federal government on this section of Grant Street even though the Federal Reserve Building has been converted to a hotel. Other newer buildings exist in the vicinity, most notably the 64-story U.S. Steel Tower (1971), but the overall feeling of Grant Street as a street of imposing office and government buildings remains intact.

Materials and workmanship

The exterior of the building exhibits high integrity of materials and workmanship. The exterior limestone and granite walls retain their original appearance and ornamentation, and the original doors, windows, and decorative bronze grilles remain in place throughout the building. Cleaning and repointing of the stonework has kept the exterior of the building in good condition.

The interior retains moderate to low integrity. Original finishes and hardware exist in many areas of the buildings, particularly the ceremonial courtrooms, judges' chambers, jury rooms, hallways, stairwells, and lobby areas. However, many other areas of the building have been refinished with modern office materials and furnishings and no longer convey any historical feeling.

Feeling

The Courthouse retains high integrity of feeling. Its overall appearance and purpose are much the same today as they were in 1934, and the presence of two other current or former federal buildings in the immediate vicinity conveys a strong sense of the government's historical presence.

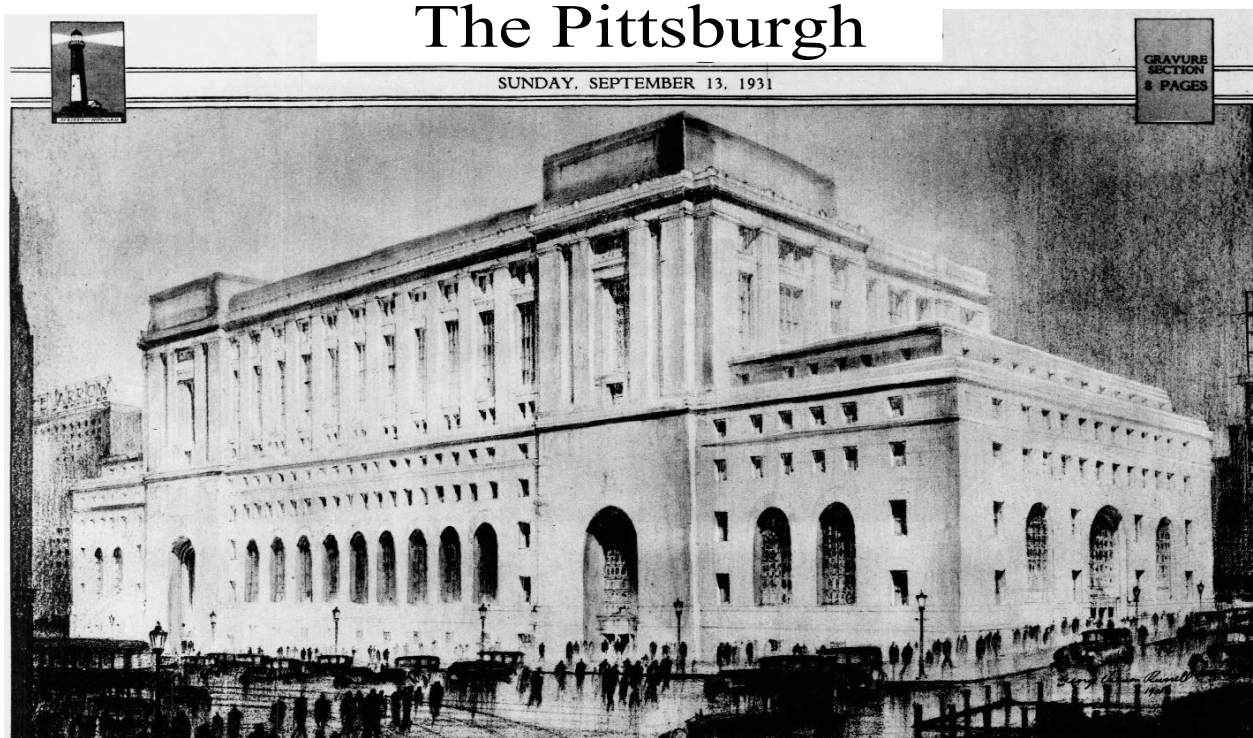
Association

The building retains moderately high integrity of association as it still fulfills two of its three main historical functions, housing the United States District Court for the Western District of Pennsylvania as well as the offices of various other agencies of the federal government. The original ceremonial courtrooms and other historic interior spaces are used in the same way today as they were in 1934. The building no longer houses the Post Office nor many of the agencies that once had offices there, though agencies have moved into and out of the building continuously throughout its history.

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9. Photos



**NOMINATION OF THE WEIS COURTHOUSE
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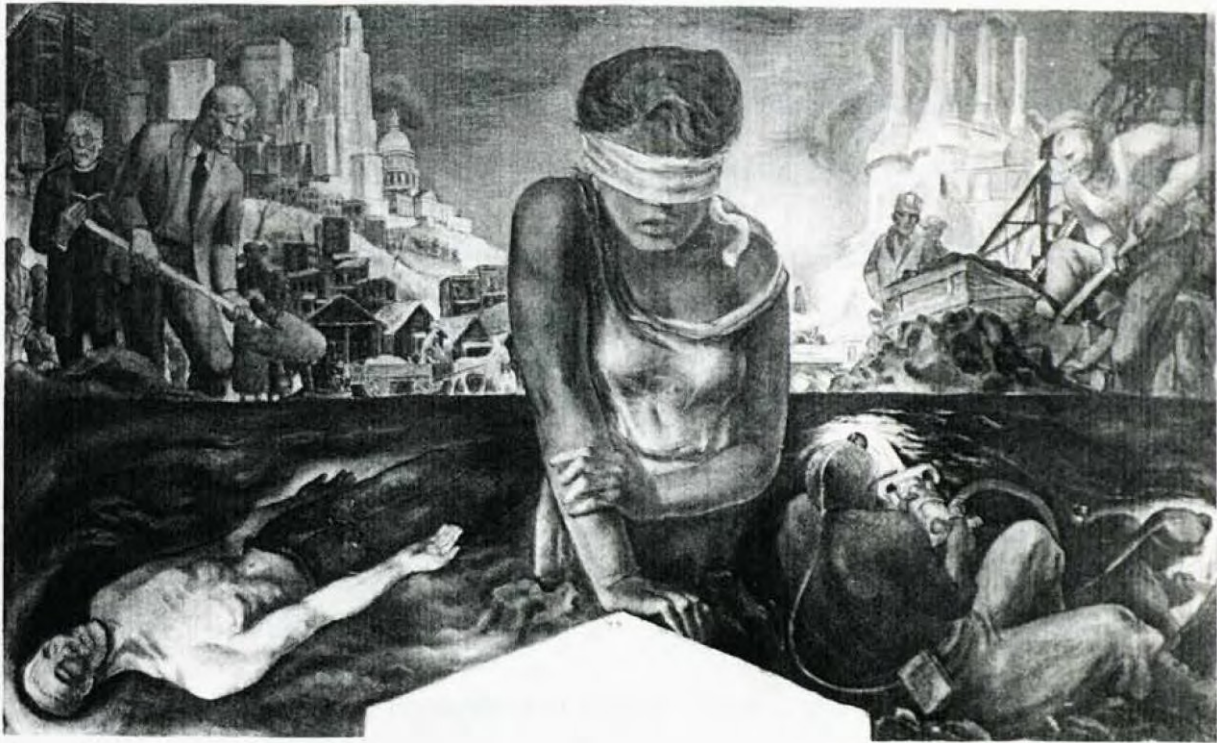
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**NOMINATION OF THE WEIS COURTHOUSE
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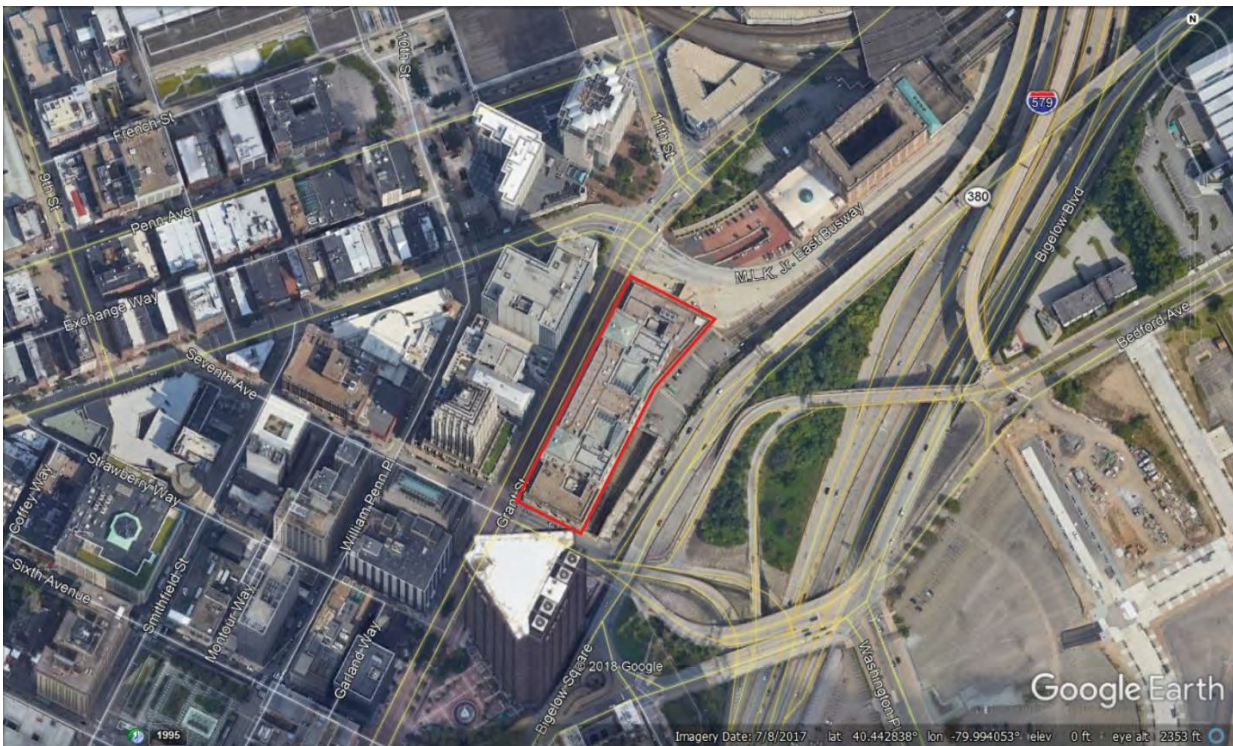
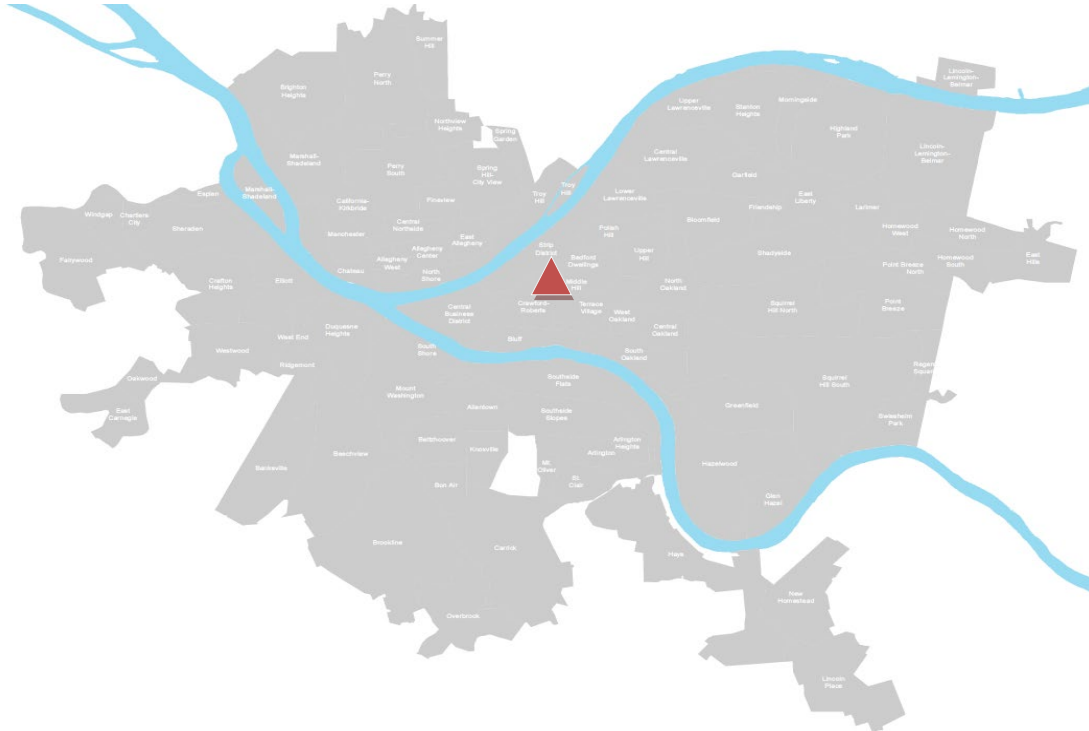
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10. Maps



**NOMINATION OF THE WEIS COURTHOUSE
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11. Recommendation of the Historic Review Commission

The Historic Review Commission held a public hearing regarding the designation of The Weis Courthouse. On September 4, 2019 the Commission voted to recommend to City Council that it designate The Weis Courthouse as historic.

12. Recommendation of the City Planning Commission

The City Planning Commission held a public hearing regarding the designation of The Weis Courthouse. On October 8, 2019 the Commission voted to recommend to City Council that it designate The Weis Courthouse as historic.

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13. Meeting Minutes

HRC MINUTES – AUGUST 7, 2019 – PRELIMINARY DETERMINATION HEARING

NOMINATION OF THE WEIS COURTHOUSE
TO BE DESIGNATED AS A CITY HISTORIC LANDMARK

CITY COUNCIL REPORT

Pittsburgh HRC – August 7, 2019

***Joseph J. Weis Jr. US Courthouse
700 Grant Street***

Historic Nomination

Owner:
Federal Government

Ward: 2nd

Lot and Block: 2-B-39

Nominator:
Matthew Falcone

Inspector:

Council District: 6th

Nomination Received: 7/12/19

National Register Status: Listed: Eligible:

Proposed Changes: Nomination for historic designation.

Discussion:

1. Ms. Quinn makes a short presentation on the property and states that the property meets **Criterion 3**, exemplification of an architectural type, style or design, **Criterion 4**, work of an architect, engineer, designer, or builder, **Criterion 7**, association with important aspects or events in cultural or social history, and **Criterion 10**, unique location and distinctive physical appearance or presence.
 2. The Commission discusses the nomination.
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-

Motion:

1. Ms. Loysen moves to approve the nomination viability.
 2. Mr. Hill seconds.
 3. Ms. Aguirre asks for a vote; all are in favor and motion carries.
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**NOMINATION OF THE WEIS COURTHOUSE
TO BE DESIGNATED AS A CITY HISTORIC LANDMARK**

CITY COUNCIL REPORT

HRC MINUTES – SEPTEMBER 4, 2019 RECOMMENDATION

NOMINATION OF THE WEIS COURTHOUSE
TO BE DESIGNATED AS A CITY HISTORIC LANDMARK

CITY COUNCIL REPORT

Pittsburgh HRC – September 4, 2019

Joseph J. Weis Jr. US Courthouse
700 Grant Street

Historic Nomination

Owner:
Federal Government

Ward: 2nd

Lot and Block: 2-B-39

Nominator:
Matthew Falcone

Inspector:

Council District: 6th

Nomination Received: 7/12/19

National Register Status: **Listed:** **Eligible:**

Proposed Changes: Nomination for historic designation.

Discussion:

3. Ms. Quinn states that they will be making a recommendation to City Council today. She makes a short presentation on the property and states that the property meets **Criterion 3**, exemplification of an architectural type, style or design, **Criterion 4**, work of an architect, engineer, designer, or builder, **Criterion 7**, association with important aspects or events in cultural or social history, and **Criterion 10**, unique location and distinctive physical appearance or presence.
 4. The Commission discusses the nomination.
-
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Motion:

4. [Inaudible] moves to make a positive recommendation to City Council.
 5. [Inaudible] seconds.
 6. Ms. Aguirre asks for a vote; all are in favor and motion carries.
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**NOMINATION OF THE WEIS COURTHOUSE
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