Architecture Around Us
By Lu Donnelly

Post Offices

"The mail and the press ... are the nerves of the body politic."
—John C. Calhoun, South Carolina statesman, 1817

Why should we care what post offices look like? Aren't they simply utilitarian structures meant to facilitate the exchange of mail? Why can't they all be boxes made of corrugated metal? As usual, it's not that simple.

Before World War II, a post office was the most popular form of "pork barrel" funding. And until 1971, the appointment of postmasters nationwide was a coveted political plum, used by politicians to reward election-time campaigners and party regulars. Even the design of post offices was fraught with politics. Some thought a paid federal staff could design the buildings more efficiently than private architects, while others believed that private architects were more inventive, creative, and sensitive to the community's needs. Some felt that post offices should all look enough alike to be immediately recognizable, the way gas stations and fast food restaurants are today. Others felt that each community deserved a unique expression of their values and a lasting commemoration of the dignity of government in limestone and granite.

The post of supervising architect, held by 16 different men between 1836 and 1939, reflected each man's preference for architectural styles and working methods. Despite the changes in leadership — and buildings that began in one administration and finished in another — there are a few supervising architects whose work is immediately recognizable. James Knox Taylor, who served from 1897 to 1912, supervised the design of hundreds of Beaux Arts and Georgian Revival buildings he thought reflected a return to the classical tradition. Louis A. Simon, whose tenure covered the design of some 40,000 new post offices during the Depression, preferred an art deco version of the classical; one wag called it "Starved-Classicism."

Since 1900, the technology involved in collecting, sorting, and distributing mail has changed radically, likewise leading to changes in the building design. In the forthcoming book about the architecture of Western Pennsylvania, we are including more than a dozen post offices or former post offices, ranging from 1883 to 1942, from one room to an entire city block. Stylistically, they run the gamut from a Renaissance Revival palace to a simple, frame vernacular structure. Most have vaguely classical ornaments like urns, acanthus leaves, and columns. Many post offices built between 1934 and 1943 also had interior murals commissioned after competitions held by the Treasury Department's Section of Painting and Sculpture.

Approximately 1,200 murals and 300 sculptures nationwide tie these buildings to their towns in a way that transcends the building arts. Sadly, fewer and fewer remain. The photos illustrate four different decades of postal design.

Lu Donnelly is one of the authors of Buildings of Pennsylvania: Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania, a forthcoming book in the 58-volume series on American architecture sponsored by the Society of Architectural Historians titled Buildings of the United States. She has authored several books and National Register nominations on Allegheny County topics.
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