

## 13. U.S.POST OFFICE AND FEDERAL BUILDING 1125 I Street (1932-33)



**Landmark Preservation Commission Resolution:** August 19, 1991  
**Designated by City Council:** November 26, 1991  
**Listed on the National Register of Historic Places:** February 10, 1983

**Description:** Each facade of this Classical style building is organized horizontally into an arcade flanked by two slightly projecting end pavilions. Vertically each facade is divided along the Classical hierarchy of base, shaft and capital. Richly-defined classical decorative elements abound including the terra cotta entablature, arcades with Corinthian pilasters, quoins defining the edges of the end pavilions, and the well-proportioned windows set within each end pavilion. A Mediterranean influence is evident in the day tile roof edges.

**Historic Significance:** In March 1913, Congress authorized an appropriation for a new postal facility in Modesto. The Government advertised for a building site for the new facility and in December 1916, the site at Twelfth and I Streets was purchased for \$17,000. A \$65,000 appropriation was included in a 1919 Public Buildings Bill. However, the bill was defeated and with it funding for construction of a post office building. Frustrated local businessmen then formed the Modesto Post office Improvement Association, which erected a one-story building on the site in 1922-23 and leased it to the Treasury Department for the city's post office. This privately funded building served as the city's main post office for ten years, until it was replaced by the present building. The current Federal Building was the first civil federal structure erected in Modesto.

Congress authorized an appropriation for a new building in 1930 but the building's design was larger than the existing lot allowed. After lengthy negotiations with the owner, an adjoining 50-foot wide strip of land was purchased, but administrative problems delayed preparation of the plans until late 1931. The plans for the building were prepared in Washington by the office of the Supervising Architect of the Treasury Department, which designed most public buildings across

the country at that time. The original design of the building was prepared with two alternatives – one with terra cotta ornamentation, and one with carved stone ornamentation. The design of the building was identical in both cases. Eventually, the building was constructed using the less expensive terra cotta ornamentation.

Bids for construction of the building were advertised in March 1932, and out of a field of 19 bidders, the construction contract was awarded to Murch Brothers, a St Louis contracting firm. Murch Brothers had considerable experience in federal building construction, and was constructing a new post office in Stockton at that time. Demolition of the old post office building began shortly after the notice to proceed was issued on November 21, 1932. The cornerstone was laid with considerable civic ceremony on March 12, 1933. The building was formally opened on October 2, 1933.

In 1936, artist Ray Boynton was commissioned to paint several tempera murals for the public lobby of the building. This commission, one of 1,371 sponsored by the Treasury Department's section on fine arts, was part of the New Deal program to aid struggling artists and to provide art in public buildings. Nine murals, depicting romanticized pastoral scenes, were completed. Boynton who was assisted by other local artists, including Mallette Dean, Suzanne Scheuer, Thomas Hayes, Robert Nurok, Luke Gibney, and Milton Anderson.

Throughout its history, the Post Office, as well as various other federal agencies, has occupied the building. The post office was demoted from a main office to station status (El Viejo Station) in 1967 upon completion of a new post office on Kearney Ave. The vacated space in the Modesto Federal Building has been occupied by other federal agencies, most notably the Internal Revenue Service, since the move. Custody of the building was transferred from the Post Office Department (now the U.S. Postal Service) to the General Services Administration in 1968.

**Architectural Significance:** The Modesto Federal Building is an excellent example of Academic Classicism, favored by the Treasury Department's Supervising Architect's office well into the early 1930s.

