

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**National Register of Historic Places Registration Form**

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions.

1. Name of Property**DRAFT**Historic name: United States Post Office—Main Street Branch

Other names/site number: _____

Name of related multiple property listing: US Post Offices in California 1900-1941 TR

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

2. LocationStreet & number: 515 Main StreetCity or town: Placerville State: California County: El DoradoNot For Publication: ☐ Vicinity: ☐**3. State/Federal Agency Certification**

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, 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. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:

___national ___statewide ___local

Applicable National Register Criteria:

___A ___B ___C ___D

Signature of certifying official/Title:_____
Date_____
State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of commenting official:_____
Date_____
Title:_____
State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

United States Post Office—Main Street Branch
Name of Property

El Dorado, California
County and State

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

- ☐ entered in the National Register
☐ determined eligible for the National Register
☐ determined not eligible for the National Register
☐ removed from the National Register
☐ other (explain:) _____

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply.)

Private:

☒

Public – Local

☐

Public – State

☐

Public – Federal

☐

Category of Property

(Check only **one** box.)

Building(s)

☒

District

☐

Site

☐

Structure

☐

Object

☐

United States Post Office—Main Street Branch
Name of Property

El Dorado, California
County and State

Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>1</u>	<u> </u>	buildings
<u> </u>	<u> </u>	sites
<u> </u>	<u> </u>	structures
<u> </u>	<u> </u>	objects
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

GOVERNMENT: post office

GOVERNMENT: government office

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

RECREATION AND CULTURE: museum

EDUCATION: library

COMMERCE/TRADE: business

United States Post Office—Main Street Branch
Name of Property

El Dorado, California
County and State

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions.)

MODERN MOVEMENT: Art Deco

Materials: (enter categories from instructions.)

Principal exterior materials of the property: Foundation: concrete, steel reinforced; Walls: concrete, steel reinforced with smooth cement plaster coat; Roof: tar composition, asphalt shingle; Other: wrought iron window grills

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current physical appearance and condition of the property. Describe contributing and noncontributing resources if applicable. Begin with a **summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, type, style, method of construction, setting, size, and significant features. Indicate whether the property has historic integrity.)

Summary Paragraph

The Main Street Branch Post Office was constructed in Placerville in 1939 as part of the Work Projects Administration (WPA) and President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal Program. Designed by Louis A. Simon, Office of the Supervising Architect for the U.S. Treasury, the building occupies the northeast corner parcel at the intersection of Main Street and Bedford Avenue. The one-story building with full ground level basement is rectangular in form, approximately 65 feet in width and 73 feet in length. Above the Postmaster's doorway hangs an oil over canvas mural commissioned by the New Deal Agencies Arts Program, Treasury Section of Fine Arts (TSFA). Tom E. Lewis painted *Forest Genetics* in 1941. Alterations following USPS occupancy of the building resulted in some integrity of design loss in the interior. Much of the former Post Office looks essentially as it did when it opened in 1940, and overall, the building retains all aspects of historic integrity.

United States Post Office—Main Street Branch
Name of Property

El Dorado, California
County and State

Narrative Description

Setting

The post office is located in a densely built-up section of Placerville's central business district, adjacent to U.S. Hwy 50 and across from the El Dorado County Courthouse on Main Street and Bedford Avenue. The City of Placerville is 43 miles east of Sacramento in the Sierra Nevada foothills where U.S. Route 50 crosses State Route 49. Originally known as "Hangtown" or "Dry Diggings," for the manner in which the miners moved cartloads of dry soil to running water to separate the gold from the soil, Placerville has a rich history rooted in gold mining. After the discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill in nearby Coloma in 1848, the town quickly became prosperous as a central hub for the Mother Lode region's mining operations and was incorporated in 1854. The town had many services—including transportation of people and goods, lodging, and banking—and had a market and general store. Placerville had become the third largest town in California, surpassed only by San Francisco and Sacramento.

Adjacent to the east elevation is a paved parking area with pull-in angle parking. At the building's front (south) facing façade are various shrubs and rock features. Bordering the building's west and southwest corner is a City Park including a stone monument dedicated by the California Centennials Commission and registered in 1950 as Historical Landmark No. 475 Old Dry Diggins-Old Hangtown-Placerville. In 1956, the historic Hangtown fire bell was placed in the small park. Additionally, a U.S. Vietnam War Veterans' Monument was placed in the park in May 2016.

Exterior

Frank Lortie, Staff Architectural Historian at the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), documented the building in 1998 for a Historical Architectural Survey Report prepared by Caltrans for use in analyzing operational improvements. His detailed architectural narrative of the building is utilized here, updated as needed.¹ In 1998, Lortie stated, "The Art Deco building remains well preserved and retains a high degree of integrity as an architectural asset to the nation and its community." His description is still applicable as the building remains structurally sound and in good condition overall, with only some cosmetic paint peeling on the exterior.

From the Caltrans report,

The one-story building has a basement below grade and a rectangular footprint. It is of steel and concrete construction, and the exterior is clad in smooth cement plaster coat. The Art Deco design is spare of ornamentation. The front part of the building contains the most important elements of the decorative treatment. On the façade, the entrance is

¹ Frank Lortie, California Department of Transportation, "Primary Record #P-9-4694 Department of Parks and Recreation Form DPR 523A with continuation sheet," November 16, 1998.

United States Post Office—Main Street Branch
Name of Property

El Dorado, California
County and State

centered on the wall and is covered by a cantilevered awning that was added as part of the 1974 county remodel. This addition includes simple stepped horizontal bands with a dentil course that decorate the awning. Surmounting the doorway is a fixed light transom with an abstract Art Deco steel grill, and above this is a cast cement low relief spread eagle, not in the Art Deco style.

Flanking the concrete front stairs are Art Deco steel light standards with tapered, fluted shafts and an inverted glass saucer on top supported by slim metal strips. The lamps sit on concrete pedestals [the right lamp was damaged and in 2024 is undergoing repair]. On both sides of the entrance are two rectangular window openings, slightly recessed, with steel grills in a Gothic-inspired Art Deco treatment.

The west and east elevations have the same fenestration and decorative elements. Each has five windows in slightly recessed bays and the two windows toward the front have the same Art Deco grills as those on the façade. At the rear (north elevation) is a service area, and a small, square wing is centered on the elevation. Its entrance projects out from the wing's exterior surface and is next to steel frame sash windows. The entrance has a large, glazed wall with six lights in a square wood frame. A squared, cement plaster-clad chimney is at the northeast corner of the rear elevation, and it has a projecting band at its cornice.

The form of this building presents a strong geometric quality and employs smooth geometric volumes in its massing. The front one-third of the building is a bit wider than the rear portion and is highlighted by stepped vertical edges indicating the change in width. The entrance opening uses the same stepped edges as the doorway reveal. The flat roof is behind a parapet, which has two simple bands, one about two feet below the top and another at the top.

The rear (north elevation) of the building was designed for receiving and shipping mail so it had a concrete mail platform as well as a side stairwell for use by employees. During the 1974 remodel the concrete platform was removed and an access ramp was installed on the northwest corner that leads up to the rear entry vestibule.

Interior

A large open main lobby area has drop ceiling tiles and fluorescent lighting that obscure the original 14-foot ceiling and reduce the ceiling height to approximately 10 feet. The main entry vestibule was removed in the 1974 remodel and the terrazzo floors were covered with carpet. Across the main lobby area and removed as part of the 1974 remodel were designated walk-up areas for postal services such as Money Orders-Postal Savings, Registry-C.O.D, Parcel Post-Stamps, and General Delivery-Stamps. To the right and also removed was a lobby desk and lock style postal boxes for public use; an office was constructed in this space in 1974. The main area serves as the lobby and main gallery area for the museum under development. All interior (outer) walls of the main area retain their original finishes to include the lobby's original blue gray

United States Post Office—Main Street Branch
Name of Property

El Dorado, California
County and State

mottled tile and smooth plaster wall finishes that still convey the building's historical character.

On both sides of the entry doorway are rectangular windows, slightly recessed, with steel grills in a Gothic-inspired Art Deco treatment. To the west side of the building is the Postmaster's office, and above the Postmaster's doorway, undisturbed since installation, hangs *Forest Genetics*. Tom E. Lewis painted the oil over canvas mural in 1941, commissioned by the Treasury Section of Fine Arts.² The Postmaster's office retains all of its original finishes, and features 13-foot plaster ceilings, hardwood floors, and three large-scale windows adorned with Gothic-inspired Art Deco steel grates. All wood features including doors, encasements, wainscot, and crown moldings are finished in a dark stain.

Part of the Postmaster's office suite is a private bathroom with marble honeycomb floor tiles, and within the bath is an iron ladder with a well opening through the ceiling to allow the Postmaster to have incognito overhead views of postal worker and finance sections. The post office vault off the main area is encased in cement and features an iron door. Two hallways lead off either side of the main area, one with two office suites, and the other with two office suites and the "Marilyn Ferguson Research Center and Library" rooms. Three additional partitioned spaces in the upper-level floorplans center were added during the 1974 remodel and are used for storage. Two employee restrooms are on the main level, one marked Women's, the other Janitor's.

Close to the workroom exit, next to the janitor's toilet entrance are stairs to the lower level that lead down to a break or lunchroom, labeled "Swing Room" on the wood and glass paneled entry door. Still intact and adjacent to the Swing Room is a secret "Lookout Gallery" that could be accessed by the postmaster's multi floor ladder to allow incognito viewing of employees through small slits in the walls. The lower level also contains five office spaces, and three storage rooms—some originally designated as sorting rooms—a boiler room, electrical room, and two restrooms, one with a shower facility. Aside from the 1974 installation of drop ceiling tiles and lighting in the offices, the walls, floors, and ceilings are concrete on the lower level. McBean and Company pale yellow ceramic tile used throughout the building's restrooms remains intact.

Alterations

Exterior

In 1974, the building underwent an interior remodel, in preparation for occupancy by the El Dorado County District Attorney's Office. A minor exterior addition of a cantilevered awning completed in 1974 does not detract from the historic integrity of the building's facade. At the rear of the building was a mailing platform and exterior stairs for employees to enter. As part of the 1974 remodel, the outdoor mailing platform was removed, which allows for automobile egress onto Bedford Avenue. Additionally, an exterior access ramp was added, which connects to the vestibule opposite the existing stairs.

² Marlene Park and Gerald E. Markowitz, "Section Murals and Sculptures by State," *Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 202-204.

United States Post Office—Main Street Branch
Name of Property

El Dorado, California
County and State

Interior

In 1974, a remodeling of the building's interior was completed by contractor/builder E.R. Cummins for occupancy by the El Dorado County District Attorney's Office. The upper level had grate style drop tile ceilings and fluorescent light panels installed throughout and office suites that included drywalled interior walls and doorways for partitioning.

The lower level had drop ceilings and lighting installed and kept the original five office spaces. A two-zone heat pump was installed onto the roof that made the boiler room no longer necessary, and it became a breakroom. The original electrical room was dual purposed as a Telecom/IT room. One storage room on the lower level was repurposed as a file room and the other two storage rooms remain unchanged. The restrooms remained unchanged aside from some removable cosmetic changes that did not damage the original tiled walls and floors.

Integrity

Location: The post office remains on its original parcel, therefore, retains integrity of location.

Design: One exterior alteration was to the rear elevation and the other exterior alteration was minor and reversible, the addition of a cantilevered awning above the front entry. Despite alterations to repurpose the building as an office and then a museum, the building retains sufficient integrity of design to read as a post office.

Setting: The surrounding buildings in historic downtown Placerville are largely intact. Across Main Street is the National Register-listed Fountain & Tallman Soda Works, operated as a museum by the El Dorado County Historical Society.

Across Bedford Avenue is the potentially National Register eligible El Dorado County Superior Court built in 1912. Several other brick or stone buildings of mid-nineteenth century construction surround the former post office. The post office and much of its surroundings retain their appearance from the period of significance, therefore the post office retains integrity of setting.

Materials: The post office retains all its exterior materials with exception of the postal platform at the rear of building. The smooth cement plaster coating and Gothic-inspired Art Deco treatments are all intact. Many interior materials are also intact such as the *Forest Genetics* mural; the postal vault; the Postmaster's office including wood features such as original doors, encasements, wainscot, crown moldings, and hardwood flooring; the Postmaster's iron ladder lookout access; and the incognito viewing gallery in the basement restroom and swing room. The lobby area walls still feature the original blue gray mottled tile and terrazzo flooring, confirmed to be in excellent shape below the carpet. Ceilings that have been covered up by drop grate tiles are also intact and are scheduled to be restored back to original 14-foot height during the museum's development. Therefore, the post office retains integrity of materials.

United States Post Office—Main Street Branch
Name of Property

El Dorado, California
County and State

Workmanship: The post office contains substantial physical evidence of the construction techniques, finishes, and design elements characteristic of its original construction as an Art Deco style building, therefore, the building retains integrity of workmanship.

Feeling: Despite alterations since original construction the building retains sufficient integrity of *location, design, setting, materials, and workmanship* necessary to convey its Art Deco style. The property continues to possess the physical features necessary to convey its aesthetic and historic integrity of *feeling*.

Association: The post office retains integrity of *location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, and feeling*; and thus retains the features essential to convey its direct association to the U.S. government's WPA construction program and New Deal Arts Programs for the Treasury Section of Fine Arts.

United States Post Office—Main Street Branch
Name of Property

El Dorado, California
County and State

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- ☒ A. Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- ☐ B. Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- ☒ C. Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- ☐ D. Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

- ☐ A. Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes
- ☐ B. Removed from its original location
- ☐ C. A birthplace or grave
- ☐ D. A cemetery
- ☐ E. A reconstructed building, object, or structure
- ☐ F. A commemorative property
- ☐ G. Less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years

United States Post Office—Main Street Branch
Name of Property

El Dorado, California
County and State

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

POLITICS/GOVERNMENT

ARCHITECTURE

ART

Period of Significance

1939-1941

Significant Dates

1939

1941

Significant Person

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Simon, Lewis A.

Lewis, Tom E.

United States Post Office—Main Street Branch
Name of Property

El Dorado, California
County and State

Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance, applicable criteria, justification for the period of significance, and any applicable criteria considerations.)

The United States Post Office—Main Street Branch in Placerville is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places at the local level of significance under Criterion A in the area of Politics/Government for its association with President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal public works programs and projects that were instituted during the Great Depression. The building is also eligible at the local level of significance under Criterion C in the area of Architecture as a property that embodies the distinctive characteristics of the Art Deco style and in the area of Art for the mural created by Tom E. Lewis under the auspices of the Federal Works Treasury Section of Fine Arts. Under cover of the *US Post Offices in California 1900-1941 Thematic Resources*, categories one, two, and three are applicable. The 1939 to 1941 period of significance encompasses construction of the building in 1939, opening of the post office in 1940, and completion of the mural in 1941.

Narrative Statement of Significance (Provide at least **one** paragraph for each area of significance.)

US Post Offices in California 1900-1941 Thematic Resources

In 1985, cover documentation was approved with accompanying individual nominations for twenty-two United States Post Offices owned by the U.S. Postal Service throughout the state of California. Considered as a group, they provided a forty-year chronology of the development of the post office as a building type. An early version of the Multiple Property Documentation Form, the thematic resource cover allows for inclusion of additional eligible properties.

The Thematic Resources document outlines four sub themed categories for building types. The United States Post Office—Main Street Branch in Placerville fits under Category (1) Functional Division d) Large Post Office/Annex. These buildings were constructed in the late 1930s and 1940s in major metropolitan centers and handled enormous volumes of mail. Occasionally, federal offices were provided, and the Post Office Department constituted the primary use.

At over 9,000 square feet, the post office was a large building for a small town. Research published by *The Living New Deal* noted, "In addition to the post office, which occupied the entire first floor, the new building housed the IRS, Department of Agriculture and office of Plant Quarantine."³

Category (2) Stylistic Division c) Art Deco of the Thematic Resources document is also applicable. Constructed in 1939 in a Modern style, the building is a prime example of early American Art Deco architecture and was designed by the U.S. Post Office Supervisor of Architecture, Louis A. Simon. The Art Deco design lacks heavy ornamentation, and otherwise

³ "Post Office (former) Placerville," Living New Deal <https://livingnewdeal.org/sites/old-post-office-placerville-ca/>.

United States Post Office—Main Street Branch
Name of Property

El Dorado, California
County and State

follows the Art Deco school of design. The building's south-facing facade features the most important elements of the building's decorative treatments, and the building's large window bays feature Gothic-inspired Art Deco steel grills.

Category (3) Funding Bill c) also applies as the building project was funded and constructed as part of the 1933-1939 National Industrial Recovery Act.

Historical Background

The Main Street Post Office is locally significant for its legacy of the public works programs of the Depression era. The U.S. Post Office Department retained control of the planning and design for its buildings. The Art Deco style that Post Office Supervisor of Architecture Louis A. Simon employed in his designs is fully apparent in the Main Street Post Office building, one of only two extant Modern Movement buildings in Placerville and a fine example of Art Deco design applied to civic architecture. Simon was credited by the AIA with raising the standard of design for federal buildings, especially since his appointment in 1934. For his efforts and for his long involvement with the American Institute of Architects (AIA), Simon was elected a Fellow in 1937, the only supervising architect to be so honored.⁴ He spent almost his entire career with the Office of the Supervising Architect for the U.S. Treasury, and he was the principal architect for the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum.

Adding to the Main Street Post Office's local significance under Criterion A is the large interior mural painted by Tom E. Lewis, commissioned in 1941 by the New Deal Agencies Arts Programs, Treasury Section of Fine Arts (TSFA). The oil on canvas visually depicts the history of the locality and the community's dedication to managing their valuable lumber resources. The mural represents a significant period and type of American artistic expression. The Placerville Post Office was one of sixty-two post offices in California to receive a Federal Art Project mural, many of which have been badly damaged, painted over, or lost over the years.

Prior to upgrading access to and across U.S. Highway 50 from Placerville's commercial district, the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) prepared a Historical Architectural Survey Report to study the area.⁵ Three potentially eligible properties were identified in the report as having historical significance: the concrete arch railroad bridge, El Dorado County Courthouse, and the former US Post Office. Caltrans Staff Architectural Historian Lortie's research report revealed in part:

When the new post office was finished in 1940 it was probably the only Modernistic building in Placerville at that time. Its location across the street from the county courthouse gave this Art Deco building even more visibility and prominence. While

⁴ Antoinette J. Lee, *Architects to the Nation: The Rise and Decline of the Supervising Architect's Office* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) [page identification not available]
<https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195128222.001.0001>.

⁵ Frank Lortie, Staff Architectural Historian for Environmental Program—Sacramento, California Department of Transportation, *Historic Architectural Survey Report 03-ED-50, KP 26.4/30.1*, March 2000, 12.

United States Post Office—Main Street Branch
Name of Property

El Dorado, California
County and State

Placerville endured the Great Depression, other foothill towns that had produced hard rock mines did well after the Federal Government set the price of gold at \$32 per ounce in 1933. Their prosperity is expressed in the number of new and remodeled buildings in the town center that were of Modernistic designs. Movie theaters and public buildings were especially prone to Art Deco or Streamline styles; Grass Valley, Nevada City and Angels Camp are good examples of this phenomenon. In some cases, a new post office in smaller towns in the 1930s was locally unique in its architecture in comparison with the prevailing styles in that town. The local lumber industry and an expanded railroad helped Placerville develop as a main transportation hub for the region. Tourism from vacationers and sportsman started to impact the town, and although it lacked a productive gold mine, Placerville's economy had done well enough during the later years of the 1930s to warrant a new, larger post office. Local officials began to pressure federal postal authorities to build a new post office to keep up with the expanding use of their Placerville facility. Finally in April 1939 the Federal Government purchased a lot for \$13,750 on Main Street at the northeast corner of Bedford Ave. for the construction of a new post office building which reportedly came in at a cost of \$105,000. Although locals had hoped for a larger combination post office and federal building, they were happy just to get a new post office.

Plans for the post office of Modern Design as a one-story building with basement went to bid in September 1939. On September 14, 1940, the new building was opened for public inspection, and the event was marked by a formal opening ceremony and dedication attended by a large crowd eager to see the new facility for themselves. Besides reflecting local needs for improved post service, the local post office can also express broad economic and social developments and the reaction of the federal government to them. During the Great Depression construction of post offices was an important part of the New Deal's public works programs, which sought to relieve unemployment and stimulate the economy, particularly the construction industry. One of the new ways the New Deal dealt with the local economic problems was to overbuild their new public facilities.

Even relatively small post offices or other federal buildings were constructed of heavy materials, mostly steel and reinforced concrete. This employed more construction workers and more suppliers in the region. Placerville's new post office was a good example of this high-end construction technique. No one in the community, however, complained about overdoing it, and all seemed to be proud that their new building was built of the highest quality materials and with such good workmanship.

Jill Kearney, President of the El Dorado County Historical Society and a local historian, authored an editorial published in *The Tailings*, November 2021 that references the Main Street Branch Post Office and provides a community member's perspective based on researching the Placerville historical archives:

The site was originally called Stony Point on the corner of Bedford and Main today. Clearing off all evidence of the saloons and stores that had occupied that corner, a great

United States Post Office—Main Street Branch
Name of Property

El Dorado, California
County and State

pit was dug. Rebar and concrete were poured to erect a solid, cubical structure. Following a general plan put together by the government, the building would be nearly indestructible, garnished with elaborate gratings upon the windows, eagle embellishment above the main door, tile, polished terrazzo main lobby, and a unique to the area mural above the Post Masters Office... The post office at 515 Main remained in operation through the years until the 1970's.

Criterion A: Politics/Government

The post office was constructed in 1939 as part of the New Deal building programs of the Work Projects Administration (WPA), renamed in 1939 from Works Progress Administration. The WPA was created in 1933 for the purpose of carrying out federal construction programs, the U.S. Post Office Department still retained control of planning and design for its buildings. In 1939, the Office of the Supervising Architect was moved from the Treasury Department to the Federal Works Agency. The Placerville Main Street Post Office 1939 working drawings are stamped by the Federal Works Agency and the cornerstone is visible on the southwest corner clearly shows the names, dates, and identification as a Federal Works Administration Post Office. With such an unaltered exterior, this building is one of the few of its kind to represent the efforts of the federal government through public works, and art programs that provided assistance to communities during that period of economic emergency.

The post office was the second federal building in Placerville. As researched by Jacob A. Bruns,

As the Depression era was a particularly active time for post office construction nationwide, three times as many post offices were constructed between 1930 and 1939 as in previous half century... of the 77 Federal Post Offices of this criteria built in California during the time frame of 1934-1943, only 24 remain standing. Of those 24, only a handful still operate as Post Offices or have retained their original interior mural, another feature of the WPA program; Treasury Section of Fine Arts, in which artists were commissioned to depict the community's prominent aspects.⁶

Criterion C: Architecture

The Placerville Post Office's distinctive period Art Deco Architecture is the work of Louis Adolphe Simon FAIA (1867-1958). The Public Works Administrations activities in the construction of public buildings was so extensive and influential that a subcategory of the Modern Movement style became known as "PWA Moderne." The post office's Art Deco design has the distinction as one of the only two surviving Modernistic buildings in Placerville. From the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts,

Louis Adolphe Simon, FAIA, studied architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and joined the Office of the Supervising Architect of the Treasury in

⁶ Jacob A. Bruns, *Great American Post Offices* (New York: John Wiley, 1998), 259.

United States Post Office—Main Street Branch
Name of Property

El Dorado, California
County and State

Washington, D.C., in 1896. Simon became chief of the office's engineering and drafting division in 1915, where he assumed responsibility for all architectural work and led the designs of hundreds of federal buildings across the U.S. Beginning in 1933 he served as supervising architect of the Public Buildings Administration, where he oversaw development of the Federal Triangle and served on the Board of Architectural Consultants; he retired from his position in 1941 but continued as an architectural consultant until 1944. He designed the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library in Hyde Park, New York, with strong influence from the president. He was named the first gold medalist of the Association of Federal Architects in 1938 and served on the American Institute of Architects committee overseeing restoration of the Octagon House.⁷

Simon was unwavering in his defense of what he considered a “conservative-progressive” approach to design in which he saw “art, beauty, symmetry, harmony and rhythm.”⁸ Simon was credited by the AIA with raising the standard of design for federal buildings, especially since his appointment in 1934. For his efforts and for his long involvement with the AIA, Simon was elected a Fellow in 1937, the only supervising architect to be so honored.

One of several notable federal projects during Louis Simon’s time with the Office of the Supervising Architect was the US Courthouse and Post Office in Los Angeles (1937-1940). Following the reorganization of the Office of the Supervising Architect in 1933, it became common practice to hire consulting architects to design federally funded buildings. This became a practical necessity as heavily funded New Deal agencies, such as the Public Works Administration (PWA), flooded the office with commissions. As a result of this policy, Gilbert Stanley Underwood (1890-1960) was retained as consulting architect for the US Court House and Post Office.⁹ Simon and Underwood collaborated on the design. Underwood worked in the Federal Architects Project from 1932 until circa 1940, later serving as Supervising Architect from 1947 to 1949.¹⁰

In 1939, the Office of the Supervising Architect was moved from the Treasury Department to the Federal Works Agency, with Simon keeping his title.¹¹ Simon retired that same year. President Franklin D. Roosevelt selected Simon, outside of his regular duties, to be principal architect of his presidential library on the grounds of his Springwood estate in Hyde Park, New York. The building was designed by Simon in association with consulting architect Henry J. Toombs in Roosevelt’s preferred Dutch Colonial Revival style (1939-1941).¹²

⁷ U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, “Louis A. Simon” (n.d.) <https://www.cfa.gov/about-cfa/who-we-are/louis-simon>.

⁸ World Biographical Encyclopedia, “Louis Simon” (n.d.) <https://prabook.com/web/louis.simon/2166555>

⁹ National Register of Historic Places, US Court House and Post Office, Los Angeles, Los Angeles County, California, National Register # 06000001.

¹⁰ Pacific Coast Architecture Database (PCAD), United States Government, Department of Justice, Federal Courthouse, Office Building #3 and Post Office, Los Angeles, CA (1937-1940), <https://pcad.lib.washington.edu/building/3860/>.

¹¹ Lee, Antoinette *Architects to the Nation*.

¹² Michael Zipp, “Architectural Chronology,” Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum <https://www.fdrlibrary.org/architectural-chronology>.

United States Post Office—Main Street Branch
Name of Property

El Dorado, California
County and State

Criterion C: Art

Federal Works Agency policy was to decorate public buildings. In the lobby of the Main Street Branch Post Office over the postmaster's door, is a mural executed in oil on canvas in 1941 by San Francisco artist Tom E. Lewis (1909-1979). Lewis studied architecture at the University of Southern California. A self-taught artist, he worked in oil and watercolor. In the 1930s, he had a home in Pasadena and a studio in Laguna Beach. In 1935, he moved to San Francisco and established a studio on Telegraph Hill. Lewis' first solo museum exhibition was at the San Diego Fine Arts Gallery in 1935 and his first major exhibition in Northern California was in 1940 at the San Francisco Museum of Art.¹³

Under the auspices of the Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture and the Works Progress Administration, Lewis was commissioned to do three murals in total. Those in the Hayward and LaGrange post offices are hung in the same lobby location, above the postmaster's office. "Forest Genetics" depicts a forestry conservation theme. Placerville is known for instituting the first Institute of Forest Genetics. Offices and the institute itself were originally located in the city. Donated to the U.S. Forest Service in 1935, the institute was relocated and became another construction project of the Works Progress Administration.

This mural masterfully depicts a story and shows a history that remains relevant. Installed in a manner nearly impossible to remove, Jack Nopp, project architect for the 1974 building remodel, noted, "Lewis received \$850 for the oil... we don't feel that the mural itself needs any repair... we have decided not to take a chance on damaging the mural by trying to remove it to some other site."¹⁴ The mural was framed in old oak found inside the building and remains above the postmaster's door. The mural measures 4 feet by 14 feet and is listed in the National Fine Arts Inventory in Washington, DC.

Post-Period of Significance

With the help of El Dorado County Historical Society, the nonprofit organization El Dorado Gold 1848 was formed to acquire the property for use as a museum after the building was declared surplus by the county in 2018. Office space for other nonprofit groups in the county was created in the ground floor area with the first-floor level planned for exhibits, a children's discovery center, and the existing Marilyn Ferguson Research Center and Library. Once grant monies have been received, restoration is planned, including removal of all drop ceilings on the first floor to reveal original ceilings and the lobby skylight and flooring restoration.

The planned Discovery Center will serve as a dynamic multi-media museum and learning center designed to educate and inspire in collaboration with community government, educators, corporate partners, and individual donors that will transform the historic property into an all-inclusive community and visitor destination. Already open to the public in the building is the Marilyn Ferguson Research Center and Library. Marilyn Ferguson was the longtime manager of

¹³ LACMA Collections, "Tom E. Lewis" [Los Angeles County Museum of Art](#).

¹⁴ "Mural Remains," *Mountain Democrat* (Placerville), December 18, 1973.

United States Post Office—Main Street Branch
Name of Property

El Dorado, California
County and State

El Dorado County Historical Society's Fountain and Tallman Museum across the street from the post office building. Marilyn was a noted El Dorado County historian who for decades collected historical research pertaining to the county. Upon her passing in 2021, her collection was donated to El Dorado Gold 1848. The collection includes maps, photos, original documents, books, and numerous research papers collected on all aspects of El Dorado County history. Since the initial Ferguson donation, two additional extensive collections were donated to the museum.

Conclusion

The Main Street Branch Post Office in Placerville is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places at the local level of significance under Criterion A in the area of Politics/Government for its association with President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal public works programs and projects that were instituted during the Great Depression. When the post office was finished in 1940 it was the only Modernistic building in Placerville at that time. Its location across the street from the county courthouse gave the Art Deco building even more visibility and prominence. The building is also eligible at the local level of significance under Criterion C in the area of Architecture, as a public building designed in 1939 by Louis A. Simon, the last Supervising Architect for the U.S. Treasury. The building embodies the distinctive characteristics of the Art Deco style and is the only one of its style in Placerville, and one of few in the state. The building is also eligible under Criterion C in the area of Art for the mural created by Tom E. Lewis under the auspices of the Federal Works Treasury Section of Fine Arts. The 1939 to 1941 period of significance encompasses construction of the building in 1939, opening of the post office in 1940, and completion of the mural in 1941. Submitted under cover of the *US Post Offices in California 1900-1941 Thematic Resources*, categories one, two, and three are applicable.

United States Post Office—Main Street Branch
Name of Property

El Dorado, California
County and State

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography (Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form.)

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United States Post Office—Main Street Branch
Name of Property

El Dorado, California
County and State

Park, Marlene, and Gerald E. Markowitz. "Murals and Sculptures by State." *Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984.

Simon, Louis A. Supervising Architect. Federal Works Agency. Architectural Drawings: United States Post Office Placerville, CA." March 15, 1939.

U.S. Commission of Fine Arts. "Louis A. Simon" (n.d.). <https://www.cfa.gov/about-cfa/who-we-are/louis-simon>. Accessed July 4, 2024

World Biographical Encyclopedia, "Louis Simon" (n.d.)
<https://prabook.com/web/louis.simon/2166555> Accessed April 2024.

Zipp, Michael. "Architectural Chronology." Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum. <https://www.fdrlibrary.org/architectural-chronology>. Accessed April 2024.

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 # _____
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # _____

Primary location of additional data:

- ☐ State Historic Preservation Office
- ☒ Other State agency
- ☐ Federal agency
- ☒ Local government
- ☐ University
- ☒ Other

Name of repository: California Department of Transportation; El Dorado County Recorder's Office; City of Placerville, Building Department; California Historical Resources Information System (CHRIS) North Central Information Center (NCIC); *Mountain Democrat*, McNaughton Newspapers, Inc _____

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): _____

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property less than one acre

United States Post Office—Main Street Branch
Name of Property

El Dorado, California
County and State

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS84: _____

(enter coordinates to 6 decimal places)

1. Latitude: 38.729722

Longitude: -120.798611

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

This site is on the Southeast corner of Main Street and Bedford Avenue. P L 9 10&12 B 23 Placerville. Portion of Lots 11 and 12 and all of Lots 9 and 10 in Block 23, according to the Official Survey and field notes of the said City of Placerville, described as follows:

Beginning at a point marked by a chisel mark on the North side of the concrete walk on the North side of Main Street in said City, which point is on the Westerly side of a concrete retaining wall and which point is further described as being located South 82° 57' 30" East 53.56 feet from the concrete coping of the Northwest corner of Bedford Avenue and Main Street in said City; thence North 8° 27' 30" East along the Easterly line of the City Park, which is also the Westerly line of the hereinbefore-mentioned retaining wall, a distance of 139.06 feet to a point on the Southerly shore line of Hangtown Creek, thence along the Southerly line of Hangtown Creek South 73° 16' 20" East a distance of 73.34 feet; thence continuing along said Southerly boundary of Hangtown Creek, South 68° 00' East a distance of 53.61 feet to the Northeast corner of Lot 9; thence leaving said creek, South 13°25' West 117.48 feet to a point on the Northerly boundary of the sidewalk, being the North line of Main Street and the Southeast corner of Lot 9; thence along said North boundary of said sidewalk and the North line of Main Street, North 81° 00' West 114.54 feet to the point of beginning.

Excepting therefrom the mineral rights, as set forth in the Patent from the United States of America to the City of Placerville, and in the Deed executed by John R. Patton, City Clerk of the City of Placerville to Charles Pearson, as recorded in Book R of Deeds, Page 29, and also in the Deed executed by John R. Patton, City Clerk of the City of Placerville to Charles F. Irwin, as recorded in Book "R", Page 137, El Dorado County Records.

Also excepting therefrom all that portion conveyed to the State of California, recorded January 30, 2007, Instrument No. 2007-6512, Official Records, and described as follows:

All that portion of the real property conveyed July 12, 1973, to County of El Dorado in Book 1206 of Official Records, at Page 593, described as follows:

Beginning at the Northwesterly corner of the above said real property; thence along the Westerly line of the above said real property, South 06° 47' 41" West, 19.702 meters; thence along the following five courses, (1) North 24° 04' 43" East, 6.039 meters; (2) North 04° 08' 07" East, 10.782 meters; (3) South 85° 51' 53" East, 1.630 meters; (4) North 05° 15' 20" East, 2.678 meters; (5) North 74° 58' 09" West, 2.880 meters to the point of beginning.

United States Post Office—Main Street Branch
Name of Property

El Dorado, California
County and State

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

The boundary includes the property originally purchased by the federal government for the post office site and is determined by legal property boundaries in the record books of the City of Placerville Assessor's Office.

11. Form Prepared By

name/title: Nancy Kam, Chairman, Museum Development Committee
organization: El Dorado Gold 1848
street & number: 515 Main Street
city or town: Placerville state: CA zip code: 95667
e-mail: naksrealestate@gmail.com
telephone: (530) 545-2000
date: March 2024; Revised July 2024; Revised August 2024

Sketch Map/Photo Key and Floor Plans by Sue Taylor

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A USGS map or equivalent (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
- **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map.
- **Additional items:** (Check with the SHPO, TPO, or FPO for any additional items.)

Photographs

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels (minimum), 3000x2000 preferred, at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map. Each photograph must be numbered and that number must correspond to the photograph number on the photo log. For simplicity, the name of the photographer, photo date, etc. may be listed once on the photograph log and doesn't need to be labeled on every photograph.

Photo Log

Name of Property:	United States Post Office—Main Street Branch
City or Vicinity:	Placerville
County:	El Dorado
State:	California
Photographer:	Nancy Kam

United States Post Office—Main Street Branch
Name of Property

El Dorado, California
County and State

Date Photographed: December 13, 2023

Description of Photograph(s) and number, include description of view indicating direction of camera:

- 1 of 10 South (front) façade, facing north
- 2 of 10 Cornerstone, south (front) façade, facing north
- 3 of 10 Front façade and west elevation, facing northeast
- 4 of 10 West elevation, facing east
- 5 of 10 North (rear) elevation, facing south
- 6 of 10 East elevation, facing west
- 7 of 10 Front façade and east elevation, facing northwest
- 8 of 10 Mural above Postmaster's office, facing southwest
- 9 of 10 Postmaster's office, facing west
- 10 of 10 Postal office safe, facing west

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for nominations to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.). We may not conduct or sponsor and you are not required to respond to a collection of information unless it displays a currently valid OMB control number.

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for each response using this form is estimated to be between the Tier 1 and Tier 4 levels with the estimate of the time for each tier as follows:

Tier 1 – 60-100 hours
Tier 2 – 120 hours
Tier 3 – 230 hours
Tier 4 – 280 hours

The above estimates include time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and preparing and transmitting nominations. Send comments regarding these estimates or any other aspect of the requirement(s) to the Service Information Collection Clearance Officer, National Park Service, 1201 Oakridge Drive Fort Collins, CO 80525.

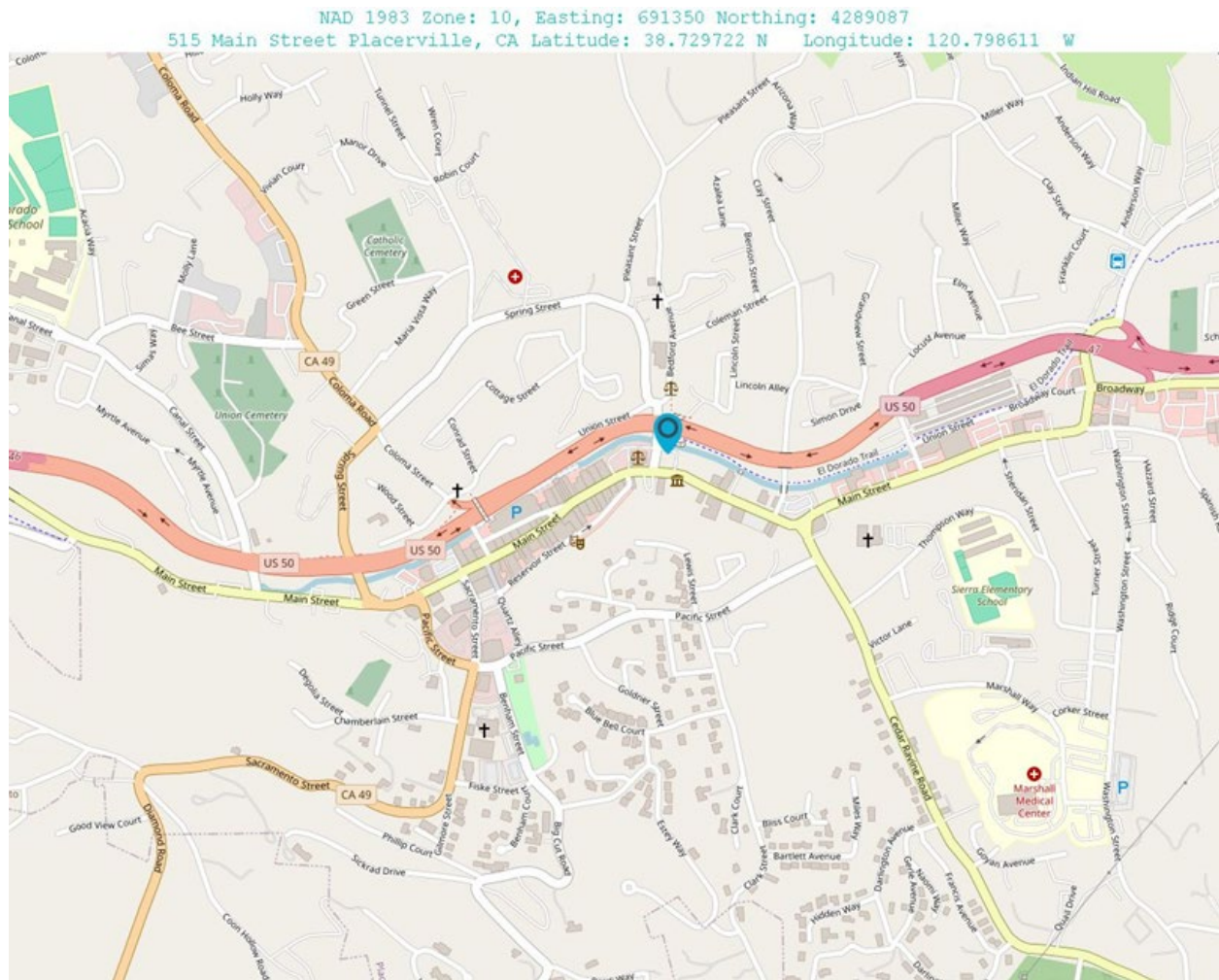
United States Post Office—Main Street Branch
Name of Property

El Dorado, California
County and State

Location Map

Latitude: 38.729722

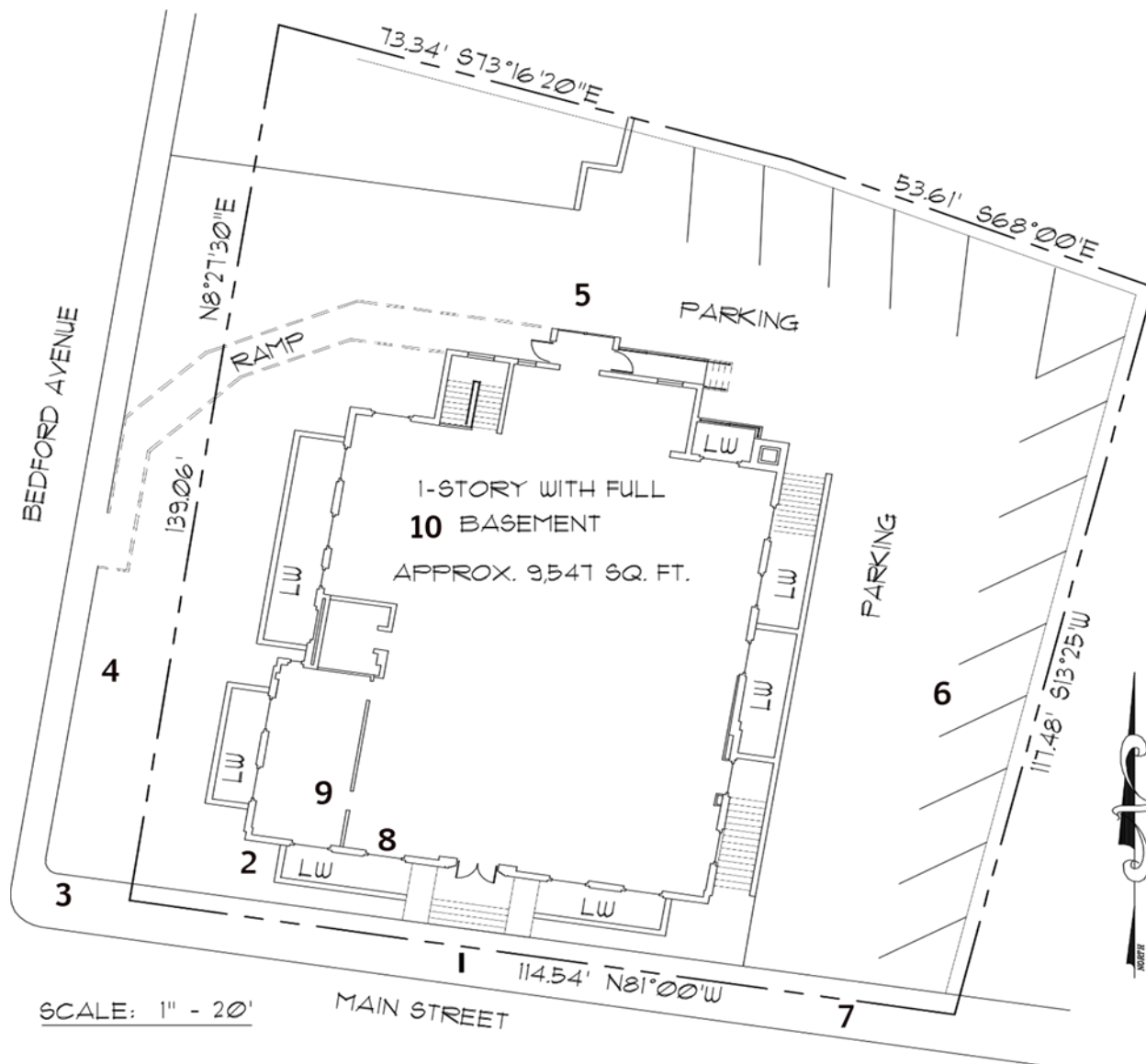
Longitude: -120.798611



United States Post Office—Main Street Branch
Name of Property

El Dorado, California
County and State

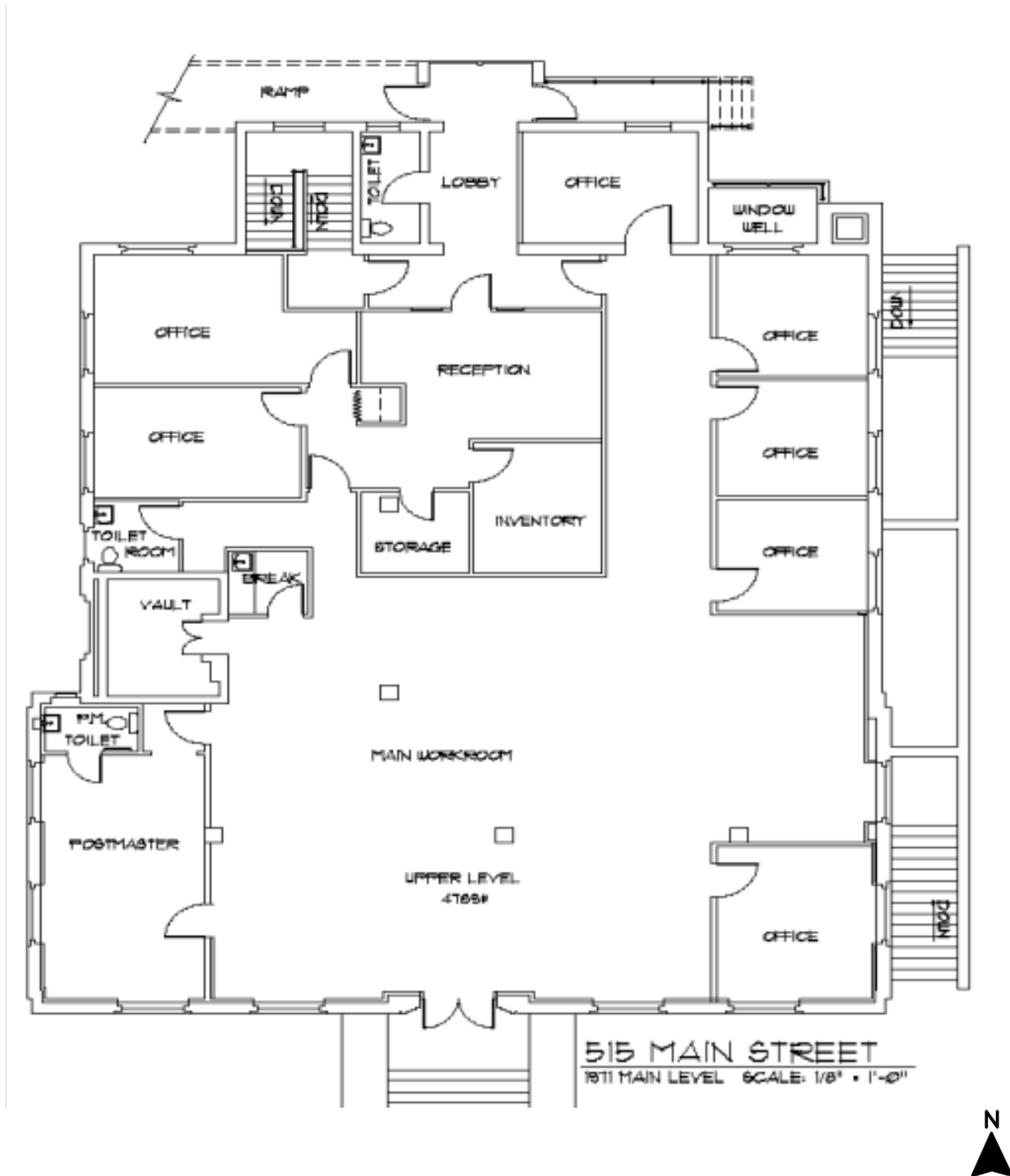
Sketch Map/Photo Key



United States Post Office—Main Street Branch
Name of Property

El Dorado, California
County and State

Figure 1 Main Level Floor Plan (Post-1974 Remodel)





United States Post Office—Main Street Branch
Name of Property

El Dorado, California
County and State

Figure 3 Main Street Post Office Placerville, c. 1945, photographer unknown



Figure 4 *Forest Genetics* mural by Tom E. Lewis c. 1941, photographer unknown



United States Post Office—Main Street Branch
Name of Property

El Dorado, California
County and State

Photo 1 South (front) façade, facing north



Photo 2 Cornerstone, south (front) façade, facing north



United States Post Office—Main Street Branch
Name of Property

El Dorado, California
County and State

Photo 3 Front façade and west elevation, facing northeast



Photo 4 West elevation, facing east



United States Post Office—Main Street Branch
Name of Property

El Dorado, California
County and State

Photo 5 North (rear) elevation, facing south



Photo 6 East elevation, facing west



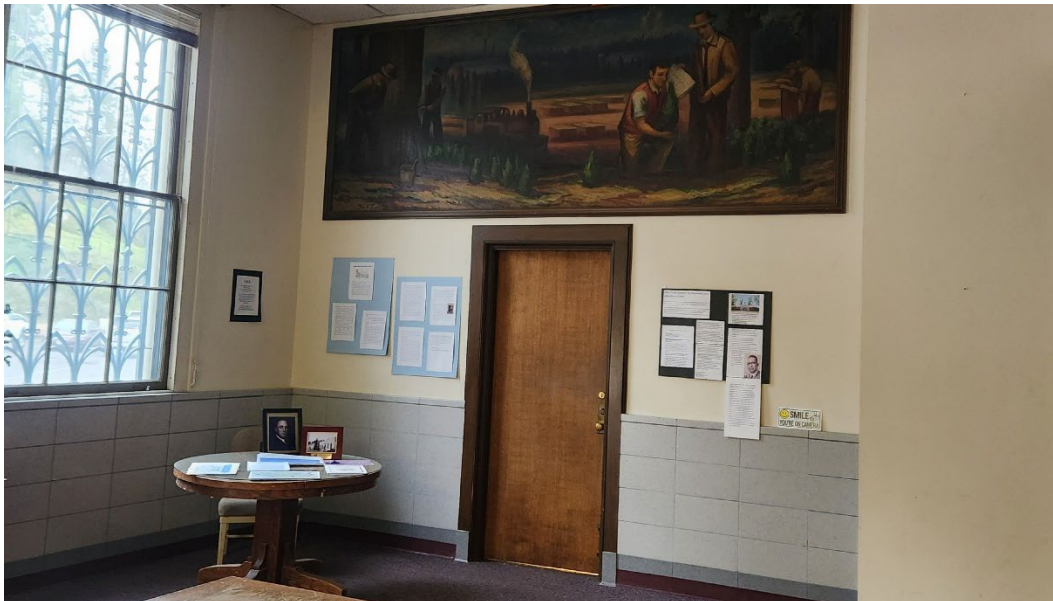
United States Post Office—Main Street Branch
Name of Property

El Dorado, California
County and State

Photo 7 Front façade and east elevation, facing northwest



Photo 8 Mural above Postmaster's office, facing southwest



United States Post Office—Main Street Branch
Name of Property

El Dorado, California
County and State

Photo 9 Postmaster's office, facing west



Photo 10 Postal office safe, facing west

