J. W. McCormack Post Office and Court House
Historical Narrative

"The John W. McCormack Post Office and Court House was constructed between 1931 and 1933 to accommodate Boston's expanding federal presence. . . As built, the interior plan contained specialized areas for postal operations and the U. S. District Court, although the bulk of the structure was given over to generic government office space." (from the Boston Landmarks Commission Report of 1997). Ralph Adams Cram designed the buildings façade and the interiors of significant spaces such as the main elevator lobby and the Court spaces on the twelfth and fifteenth floors.

The building contains some magnificent examples of Art Deco architectural details, executed in a wide variety of materials. The most historically significant spaces are areas exhibiting unique or distinctive qualities, containing original materials or elements, representing examples of skilled craftsmanship, or representing the work of a known architect or builder.

These spaces include the Courtrooms and Main Library, located on the 12th and 15th floors. The historic courtrooms contain the highest level of detail in the building. Wood wainscoting, marble walls and rusticated plaster are some of the finishes encountered in these rooms. The ceilings in the courtrooms are ornate, most with ornamental coffers or trim embellished with decorative plaster details. The ceilings and trim were originally polychrome, with as many as eight colors used in one cornice band. Colors such as vermillion, purple blue and orange tan are noted on original drawings.

15th Floor Courtroom

The Ground Floor Entrance, Lobbies and Stairway, the First Floor Lobby, the Second Floor Elevator Lobby, the Second Floor Registry Lobby, the Third Floor Elevator Lobby, the Twelfth Floor Lobby and Corridors, and the Fifteenth Floor Elevator Lobby and Corridors contain polished marble walls, fluted pilasters and carved surfaces.

Postal service counters originally lined parts of the lobbies, with some of them extant. Terrazzo floors with marble inlay are used throughout these spaces.

The ceilings exhibit varying degrees of coffering and molded ornamentation, and all were originally polychromed.

Slightly less-significant spaces include upper level main elevator lobbies and corridors and the main fire stair. The elevator lobbies located from the 4th to the 16th floors, excluding the 12th, 14th and 15th all contain similar materials and details. The materials are typically a marble wainscot, with simple decorative plaster pilaster caps, with coffered beams and soffits and a simple plaster crown molding. The floors are terrazzo squares with a border of 1" black and white ceramic mosaic tile.

The upper floor corridors run east/west from the elevator lobbies. These corridors are less ornate than the elevator lobbies. The typical materials include plaster walls with a metal chair rail. The floors are terrazzo and ceramic mosaic tile, similar to the elevator lobbies. The ceilings are flat plaster with a decorative cove and cornice. Many of these corridors were not in the original drawings for the building and were completed as part of the original "tenant fit-out" for the building.

There are nine original judges' suites, a former District Attorney's Office and an original Postmaster's Office. The offices contain original walnut wainscoting, oak parquet flooring, a decorative floral patterned cornice, and stepped plaster ceilings. These offices have been altered to varying degrees.

Other areas of the building are more modest in design and finish and are not as significant in terms of, material or conditions. Some of these spaces are the court support spaces, general office spaces and postal workspaces. The court support spaces are typically adjacent to the courtrooms and include the judge's robing room, jury rooms and stairs connecting the jury room to the courtroom floor below. The finishes in the court support offices and general offices are typically mastic floors, metal chairrail and baseboard, and flat plaster walls with a flush metal picture rail.

The stairwells to the jury rooms are typically steel stringers with cast iron and bronze railings with soapstone treads. Many of the office spaces have been altered over time, although many of the original materials remain at least partially intact. Postal work areas have largely disappeared. The original materials used in the postal work areas included wood block floors with beaded or grooved wood wainscot, wood base, wood cap and wood windowsills.

The secondary corridors, elevator lobbies and fire stairways are also considered more modest in design and finish and not as significant in terms of, material or conditions. These spaces typically contain metal chair rail, plaster walls and terrazzo floors. Courtroom 4 is considered thus due to its extensive renovation.

The Lower (Post Office Square) Lobby was once a “back door” for the postal service, but has become (and will continue to be) the main entry. It is handicapped accessible and can be reconfigured to handle the required security equipment.