

# 106 SUCCESS STORY

## Stakeholders Ensure Long-Term Preservation of New Deal-Era Building

Modesto, California



“This building embodies a significant part of Modesto’s history and culture, as an agricultural community in the San Joaquin Valley, and we’re proud to do our part to protect it.”

—PATRICK KELLY, MPA, AICP  
Planning Manager, City of Modesto

### THE STORY

With considerable civic ceremony, the cornerstone of the Modesto Federal Building and Post Office was laid in the spring of 1933. The Mediterranean Classical Style building formally opened that fall. Constructed under the New Deal—a series of public work projects and federal programs that responded to the Great Depression—it was the first federal building for this San Joaquin Valley city. In 1936, under the New Deal’s Treasury Relief Arts Project (TRAP), various artists painted a rectangular mural and 12 lunettes depicting local agricultural activities such as plowing, grain harvesting, gathering fruit, and meat packing. The artworks were installed in the high-ceilinged postal lobby. The U.S. Postal Service (USPS) was a longstanding tenant in the building along with other various federal agencies, such as the U.S. Department of Labor. In the late 1960s and 1970s, the lobby was reconfigured, the postal workroom subdivided, and an elevator installed. In the 1980s, the building was spared from the widespread demolition and construction occurring in the civic center, and the General Services Administration (GSA) successfully nominated it for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

### THE PROJECT

In 2002, after the USPS relocated most of its operations elsewhere, GSA determined the historic property to be surplus to the needs of the federal government, and GSA’s preservation and disposal personnel worked together on next steps. GSA screened the property for homeless assistance and other public uses and planned to offer it to Stanislaus County via negotiated sale in 2006.

### THE 106 PROCESS

As the federal agency carrying out the property disposal, GSA was responsible for conducting the Section 106 process under the National Historic Preservation Act. Section 106 requires that federal agencies identify historic properties and assess the effects on those properties of the projects they carry out, fund, or permit. Federal agencies also are required to consult with parties that have an interest in the historic properties when adverse effects may occur. Also in 2006, GSA commenced Section 106

Photos: Top, entranceway (photo by Paul Becker Photography, courtesy GSA); Bottom: “Packing Cheese,” by Ray Boynton (photo by Peter Hardholdt, courtesy GSA); Right, restored postboxes with murals in lobby (photo by Paul Becker Photography, courtesy GSA); Modesto Architectural Festival tour of former postal lobby (photo courtesy Modesto Art Museum/Nathan Thies)

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Photos: From left, side and rear façades (photo by Paul Becker Photography, courtesy GSA); "Plenty" by Ray Boynton (courtesy GSA); historic postal scale (photo by Paul Becker Photography, courtesy GSA)



consultation with the California State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO), stating its intention to transfer the property to the county with a historic preservation covenant, ensuring long-term preservation of the historic characteristics of the building. However, due to financing concerns during the Great Recession, the county terminated negotiations in 2010. The USPS moved out of the building in 2011 and, as the real estate market began recovering, GSA offered the property at public auction with a historic preservation covenant and stated its intention to award the property to the Finch Fund, LLC, a family trust. In 2013, GSA reinitiated consultation and proposed to resolve the adverse effects associated with the disposal via a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA). Two of the building's original TRAP lunettes, federal personal property missing since their removal in the 1970s, were located by the Finch Fund in 2011. They were turned over to GSA for stabilization and storage in accordance with its fine arts policy. The MOA and accompanying historic preservation covenant include provisions for adaptive use, maintenance, design review, inspection, and public access. The Modesto Landmarks Preservation Commission agreed to be the covenant enforcement entity, and the SHPO agreed to provide technical assistance in meeting the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation. In late 2013, the Finch Fund agreed to its responsibilities. The MOA was executed, the property was transferred, and the historic preservation covenant was recorded in the deed shortly thereafter.

**Consulting Parties:**

- General Services Administration
- ACHP
- California State Historic Preservation Officer
- City of Modesto
- Modesto Landmarks Preservation Commission
- Finch Fund, LLC

**THE SUCCESS**

The Finch Fund completed its adaptive use of the property in 2014 and operates it as an office building. In accordance with the MOA, during business hours, the public can visit the restored historic lobby containing the New Deal artwork and reinstalled postal boxes. GSA completed conservation of the two recovered lunettes and plans to coordinate installation details with the new owners in the future. Due to GSA's laudable stewardship and diligent consultation, a local commission's commitment to preservation, and responsible private owners, an important local icon, built as a sign of hope during an era of national economic distress, will remain a community asset for many years to come.

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For more about Section 106 and the ACHP go to [www.achp.gov](http://www.achp.gov)



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