

106 SUCCESS STORY

Iconic Pioneer Courthouse Gets 21st Century Makeover

Portland, Oregon



“It’s the single most important 19th century government building in the Pacific Northwest to survive into the 21st century. Opened in 1875 as the seat of the federal government in the region—incorporating the post office, judiciary, customs office, and tax department—the Pioneer Courthouse welcomed presidents, witnessed significant trials and court hearings, and has stood watch as Portland has grown from a small town to a large city.”

— PIONEER COURTHOUSE
HISTORICAL SOCIETY



THE STORY

Completed in 1875, Pioneer Courthouse is the oldest federal courthouse west of the Mississippi River still in use, and the oldest public building in Portland. Occupying a full city block facing the Pioneer Square Plaza in downtown Portland, the Italianate Style building is faced with smooth-cut sandstone and crowned with an octagonal wood cupola. In 1902, the building underwent its first major rehabilitation. In 1933, the courts and some post office functions relocated to a newly constructed courthouse nearby, and Pioneer Courthouse was unsuccessfully put up for sale despite community concerns. In 1939, Congress authorized its demolition, which was put on hold because of World War II and the Korean War. A second rehabilitation, in the early 1970s, increased the size of the building to better accommodate the U.S. Court of Appeals and a U.S. Postal Service (USPS) branch, reaffirming the building’s place as a civic asset. In 1973, Pioneer Courthouse was added to the National Register of Historic Places and designated a National Historic Landmark (NHL) in 1977. Following a series of major earthquakes and a diminished USPS presence in the building, the General Services Administration (GSA) commenced a planning effort to improve efficiency, safety, and security at the important community landmark.

THE PROJECT

In 2001, GSA received funding to complete a seismic retrofit, upgrade systems and security, introduce underground parking, and rehabilitate the building’s interior and exterior. An innovative seismic upgrade, a base isolation system, was proposed which included shear walls and anchoring of the floor to perimeter walls. In addition, for the courthouse to remain in the federal inventory and adequately house the Court of Appeals, GSA planned to recapture and reconfigure space formerly occupied by the USPS. The nature and extent of the proposed work posed serious challenges to the historic integrity of the courthouse.

THE 106 PROCESS

GSA was responsible for conducting the Section 106 process under the National

Photos: Above, restored façade and landscape (courtesy GSA); Right, Pioneer Courthouse circa 1950 (courtesy GSA); Pioneer Courthouse in Pioneer Square Plaza (courtesy M.O. Stevens, Wikimedia Commons)

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Photos: Above, restored courtroom; Right, base isolators under the building installed to absorb the shock from a seismic event; the restored stairs (photos courtesy GSA)

Historic Preservation Act. Section 106 requires that federal agencies identify historic properties and assess the effects of the projects they carry out, fund, or permit on those properties. Federal agencies also are required to consult with parties that have an interest in the fate of the property when adverse effects may ensue.

Given the prominence of Pioneer Courthouse in the community, the project attracted significant public interest. The aspects of greatest concern were the introduction of an underground parking garage for the judges, an adverse effect, and the full removal of postal services. To resolve adverse effects, GSA consulted further with the Oregon State Historic Preservation Officer, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the National Park Service, the city, and the building tenants and developed a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA).

The MOA set forth design review protocols, documentation standards for the building, and establishment of a Citizens Advisory Panel (CAP) to inform development of a public outreach and interpretation program. GSA also relocated the USPS function to the historic Gus J. Solomon U.S. Courthouse nearby. Immediately after execution of the MOA, the CAP developed a temporary interpretive plan for use during construction and then a permanent exhibit explaining the building's history, seismic upgrade, and rehabilitation. Following the protocols, GSA carried out an extensive restoration of the building's exterior and significant interior spaces along with the surrounding landscape.

THE SUCCESS

Through the Section 106 consultation process, GSA developed a comprehensive approach to restoration and necessary upgrades, responsive to the community and preservation needs. GSA committed to continued public access for tours and special events, a collaborative approach to interpretation, and continuing stewardship of the NHL. In doing so, GSA ensured long-term viability of Pioneer Courthouse through continued federal use, securing its future as a beloved icon of Oregon's heritage.

Consulting Parties:

General Services Administration
 ACHP
 Oregon State Historic Preservation Officer
 National Park Service
 United States Ninth Circuit Courts
 United States Postal Service
 City of Portland
 National Trust for Historic Preservation

For more about Section 106 and the ACHP go to www.achp.gov

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