

The **United States Post Office** is an historic building located in [Des Moines, Iowa, United States](#). It was individually listed on the [National Register of Historic Places](#) in 1974.^[1] It became a [contributing property](#) of the [Civic Center Historic District](#) when it was established in 1988. It now houses administrative offices for [Polk County](#).



U. S. Courthouse and Post Office, Des Moines, Iowa, built- 1871, demolished- 1968

Prior to the opening of this building the post office was located in the old Federal Building at Fifth and Court Avenues, beginning in 1870. A \$150,000 appropriation was approved by the [United States Congress](#) in legislation passed in 1902 for property for a new post office.^[2] A further appropriation was passed in 1904 and in 1906 the first of three appropriations for constructing the building was passed. The building was designed by [James Knox Taylor](#) of the [United States Treasury Department](#) staff in 1908 and construction began the following year. The building was completed in 1910 for \$488,016.67.^[2] The post offices was the second building constructed in the Civic Center district and the first structure the federal government provided as part of the [City Beautiful Movement](#) project in the city of Des Moines.

The post office moved their operations into the building in the spring of 1910. By 1925 the building was becoming too small to house postal operations. The Des Moines architectural firm of Wetherell & Harrison drew up plans in the early 1930s for a large addition to the south, but no money was appropriated for it. Plans for a smaller addition were approved in 1934 and completed the following year. There were plans for another addition to the south, but it was never built. However, a smaller addition, which was torn down in the 1970s, was subsequently built. The post office moved their operations from this building to a larger facility at Second and University Avenues in 1971. The building sat empty until the late 1970s when it was acquired by Polk County. They in turn renovated the building for their use as an office building, which was designed by the Des Moines architectural firm of Woodburn & O'Neil. The north lobby of the building is preserved and used as a public place for art and historical exhibits. It is known as the Polk County Heritage Gallery.

DES MOINES' FIRST POST-OFFICE BUILDING.

On June 26, 1849, Hoyt Sherman was appointed postmaster of Fort Des Moines. The office was then kept in the law office of P. M. Cassady, on Second street. In the spring of 1850 Fort Des Moines received quite an addition to her population from Indiana and Ohio. L. P. Sherman, brother of the postmaster, established the *Fort Des Moines Gazette*. The government increased the mail service from a weekly mail to a tri-weekly.

This inspired the young postmaster to have an office of his own. He resolved to build a post-office, and with him to resolve meant to act accordingly. During the year 1850 he erected a building on Second street between Vine and Market streets on one of the lots now occupied by S. Green and Son's factory, a building 16x16, one story, all of native lumber. This was Des Moines' first post-office building. The building now occupied by the post-office is a handsome four story edifice on the corner of Fifth street and Court avenue, facing south and west. There are forty rooms in the building, there being accommodations for all the different departments necessary for conducting the business of the Federal government. There are about 215 people employed in the building in the various departments.

The rooms are large, commodious, and conveniently arranged. The building is supplied with two elevators, it is heated by steam which is supplied by a battery of three large boilers. The building is lighted by gas in most of the rooms, but electric incandescent lights are used in the corridors. The post-office is kept open day and night the year round except on Sundays and legal holidays, when it is kept open for a part of the day only. Below we give a list of the postmasters of Des Moines and the dates on which they received their appointments. This list was secured from the government records by Hon. Isaac Brandt:

Josiah Smart, December 13, 1845.

The post office was in Agency House, about where the Tuttle stone packing house now stands. Smart served seventy-eight days.

Thomas K. Brooks, March 2, 1846.

Was the first authorized postmaster. He removed the post-office to his own house, which stood south of the now old Redhead barn, and on the south side of what is now Court avenue, and in I. N. Thomas' addition.

Phineas M. Cassady, December 31, 1846.

He moved the post-office into one of the military log houses on 'Coon Point; afterwards removed the post-office to his own law office, near where is now Green & Son's foundry, south of Vine on Second street, west side of street.

R. L. Tiderick, October 10, 1848.

Post-office remained in Cassady's law office.

Hoyt Sherman, June 26, 1849.

He built a frame on the ground where Green's foundry now is, on Second street south of Vine,

and moved the post-office into it.

Wesley Redhead, February 10, 1853.

Remained at the old stand for a while, afterwards removing post-office into the Sherman block, now on Court avenue, about 1857. Mr. Redhead served the longest term of any postmaster yet appointed, ending May 16, 1861.

John Teesdale, May 16, 1861.

Post office remained in the Sherman block.

Geo. C. Tichenor, April 16, 1867.

Remained in Sherman block for a while, and then removed to a frame building on Third street, rear of the Sherman block, and in 1870 the main part of the present public building was finished, and the post-office was removed to it, and there remains to this date.

J. S. Clarkson, July 27, 1871.

John Beckwith, March 3, 1879.

W. H. Merritt, August, 12, 1886.

In 1885 an addition was ordered to be built to the building and the work was immediately commenced. This was completed in the year 1889.

Isaac Brandt, June 2, 1890.

Edward H. Hunter, July 26, 1894.

The post office was called 'Coon River Post-office till June 1, 1846, when the name was changed to Fort Des Moines.

Des Moines Beginnings: Des Moines Post Office opens on August 6, 1889.

- By Greg Lange
- Posted 12/12/1998
- HistoryLink.org Essay 500



Mail truck in front of Des Moines Post Office, 1915

Courtesy Des Moines Historical Society

The opening of a post office is an important marker of the beginning of a community. On August 6, 1889, Des Moines Post Office opens. James F. Hiatt is the first postmaster. Des Moines is located on the shores of Puget Sound, 12 miles north of Tacoma and 14 miles south of Seattle.

The post office was located in Hiatt's general store near the waterfront at the corner of Cliff Avenue and Cherry Street (which was located between the future S 220 and 223rd streets).

Des Moines started as a real estate development. In 1888, F. A. Blasher arrived in King County from Des Moines, Iowa, and began investing in land. In early 1889, he purchased a 154 acre homestead in southwest King County. Blasher and three other investors formed the Des Moines City Improvement Company to develop the property. On July 29, 1889, they filed the Town of Des Moines 120-acre subdivision. Within a week of that, the post office was established. Within a few months the first postmaster James Hiatt sold his grocery store to James K. Ely, and on February 8, 1890, the Post Office Department appointed Ely postmaster.

An 1890 description of Des Moines intended for promotional purposes exaggerated the number of buildings and perhaps some other things as well:

"Des Moines now has about 300 houses, including residences, business blocks, a school, churches, mercantile houses representing every branch of trade, hotels, blacksmith and wagon shops, a sawmill employing 25 hands, a chair factory, boat manufactory, brickyards, and the only tin factory on the coast. The company has communications from capitalists asking for sites for the establishment for various manufacturing enterprises, which will in the near future afford employment to a large number of skilled mechanics..." (Kennedy, p. 16).

The 1890 census found that Des Moines had a population of 212 persons, which makes 300 buildings sound improbable.

By 1892, with Des Moines at the peak of its business activity for the early period, the following establishments conducted business:

- J. G. Ely grocery
- Young Brothers General Store
- William H. Martin boat builder
- E. J. Martin hotel
- The Finnell Brothers and Joseph Sparling sold real estate
- S. B. Vrooman notarized real estate deeds

- William Vann Gaskin operated a sawmill at the mouth of Des Moines Creek that employed about 15 men
- James Markwell ran a roof shingle bold mill that employed 25 men
- North of town, Mr. Cooper operated a black gunpowder manufacturing plant established in 1889

Before the end of 1890, the post office moved across the street to the home of the new postmaster, William H. Bailey. Apparently Bailey was blind, and had an assistant sort the mail for him. On March 7, 1892, Miss Nettie Finnell became the new postmaster. She moved the post office to her house on Grand Avenue (future 6th Avenue S, just north of S 225th Street). She continued in this position through two marriages until 1910.

Initially, the post office delivered mail to Des Moines via steamer from Tacoma. By 1893 or 1894, the mail arrived overland from Tacoma. Two or three times a week, a rider on horseback crossed the Tacoma tideflats and followed the old military road to drop the mailbag off at Des Moines. He continued on his route to Buenna, Adelaide, and Steele's Landing before returning to Tacoma. By the late 1890s, the postal department had reestablished steamship delivery along the Tacoma-Seattle route.

In 1893, when a depression hit the nation, the booming town imploded. Businesses moved or went bankrupt. The Markell mill and the Young Brothers store were probably the only businesses to survive into the twentieth century. In 1900, despite the 1897 gold rush that lifted Seattle out of the doldrums, Des Moines had lost more than 20 percent of its 1890 population. The developer's plans for a large residential area lay fallow for decades.



Iowa

United States. IA. Fort Des Moines, IA. Polk Co. (open 1904-1955). Dated 1909/08/25



Des Moines, Iowa Dodge Branch 1917 Universal Machine Type DB300 1917-1919 Obverse Red, White and Blue Illustrated corner card Reverse Blue Printed Advertising National War Work Council of the Young Men's Christian Associations of the United States Patriotic Reduced at left.



Des Moines, Iowa Dodge Branch 1917 Universal Machine Type DB300 1917-1919 PPC (New Arrivals, Camp Dodge, Iowa)



Des Moines, Iowa Dodge Branch 1918 Universal Machine Type BSB201 1917-1919 Red and Blue Illustrated corner card YMCA



Des Moines, Iowa Dodge Branch 1918 Universal Machine Type BSB201 1917-1919 PPC (U.S. Soldiers on the March)



Des Moines, Iowa Dodge Branch 1918 Universal Machine Type BB201 1917-1919 PPC (Our First Lesson, Camp Dodge, Ia.)



Des Moines, Iowa Dodge Branch 1918 Universal Machine Type DB300 1917-1919 PPC (Ready to Charge the Trenches.)



Des Moines, Iowa Dodge Branch 1918 Universal Machine Type DB300 1917-1919 PPC (No Hot Towels Here).



Des Moines, Iowa Dodge Branch 1918 Universal Machine Type DB300 1917-1919 PPC (Our Flag, the Flag of Liberty Patriotic).



Des Moines, Iowa Dodge Branch 1918 Universal Machine Type DB300 1917-1919 PPC (Patriotic I'm Going to Be an Express Wagon When I Come Back showing soldier)



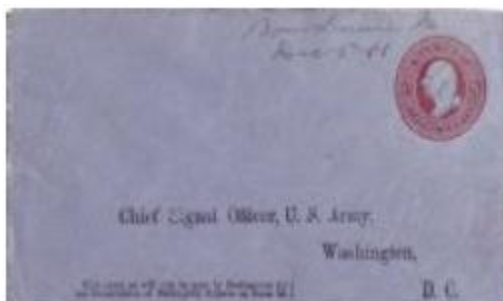
Des Moines, Iowa Dodge Branch 1918 Universal Machine Type DB300 1917-1919 PPC (Comic Patriotic).



2c Washington Franklin 1919 Des Moines, Iowa, Dodge Branch PPC (Red Cross Building, Camp Dodge) to Pesotum, Ill.



Creston 1898 large numeral duplex Color Flag Spanish American War Patriotic.



Paper Official Envelope.

Boardman 1881 ms 1878-1883 3c Washington War Dept. Blue



Des Moines 1 1943 machine PPC (U.S. Court House Des Moines, Iowa) Inscribed Company B Brk. 5, R.C. 1771 Camp Dodge, Iowa.