

**STAFF REPORT: MAY 8, 2024 MEETING**  
**APPLICATION NUMBER: HDC2024-00129**  
**ADDRESS: 231 W. LAFAYETTE STREET**

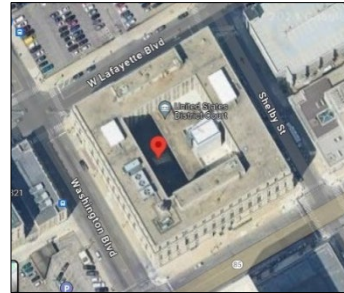
**PREPARED BY: A. DYE**

**HISTORIC DISTRICT: HISTORIC DETROIT FINANCIAL**  
**APPLICANT: TODD SATTER, US GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION, GREAT LAKES REGION**  
**PROPERTY OWNER: GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION**  
**DATE OF PROVISIONALLY COMPLETE APPLICATION: APRIL 15, 2024**  
**DATE OF STAFF SITE VISIT: APRIL 18, 2024**

**SCOPE: ERECT RAMPS AT FAÇADE, INSTALL SIGNAGE**

### EXISTING CONDITIONS

The twelve-story building at 231 W. Lafayette fills an entire city block and is bounded by W. Lafayette Street to the north, Shelby Street to the east, Fort Street to the south, and Washington Boulevard to the west. Erected 1932 – 1934, the building was designed by BV Gamber, Derrick and Gamber Architects, and features sculptures by Corrado Parducci.



The following description is from the Historic Detroit Financial District Final Report:

*An Art Deco design that contains stylized references to Neoclassicism, the building stands on the site occupied by the previous Federal Building built in the 1890s. Built on a black granite base, the rectangular building has an open central court above the second floor. Fluted pilasters mark the triple recessed entrances. Above the entrance, relief sculptures of eagles and emblems portray the building's governmental functions. Highly stylized large, fluted piers also rise through the central portion of the third to sixth floor façade to support a broad entablature with round sculptural plaques alternating with bands of fluting. The upper three stories below the flat roof are setback slightly from the lower part of the building. The interior is finished in high quality materials such as travertine marble and polished granite and displays plaster detailing that includes fine stencil work. Of particular interest is the U.S. District Courtroom Room 733. It contains the polished walls and other marble features and the mahogany judge's dais and other wood trim and furnishings that came from the former courtroom of Chief District Judge Arthur J. Tuttle in the old federal building. In 1931 when that building was to be demolished for this new structure, Judge Tuttle had his courtroom finish dismantled and reinstalled in his new courtroom.*



View of northwest corner of building; (l) W. Lafayette Street and (r) Washington Boulevard. The building's primary entrance is on W. Lafayette and one underground garage entrance is at Washington Boulevard.  
Staff photo, April 18, 2024.



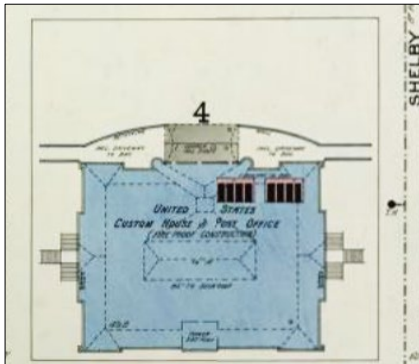
View of southwest corner of building – (l) Washington Boulevard and (r) Fort Street. The building's secondary entrance is centrally located on Fort Street.  
Staff photo, April 18, 2024.

## PROPOSAL

- Erect two ramps at W. Lafayette entrance.
- New internally lit signage will be installed on the ramp's exterior walls.

## STAFF OBSERVATIONS AND RESEARCH

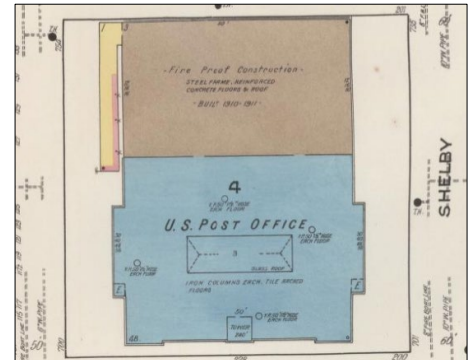
- The Historic Detroit Financial District was enacted on October 31, 2011.
- According to the website [Historic Detroit](#):
  - Detroit's original Federal Building and Post office opened in 1860 and was located at the corner of Griswold and Larned.
  - Within 20 years, the city's growth required that a larger building be erected, so in 1882 the federal government appropriated the first round of money for a new building. The city decided that the northwest corner of Shelby and W. Fort was a better location than the existing one. Over the course of eight years, the lots bound by Shelby, Fort, Washington (then called Wayne) and W. Lafayette were purchased. Excavation began on June 29, 1890.
  - The land that would become the home of the new federal building was once the site of Ft. Lernoult, which was built in 1778-79 and later renamed Ft. Shelby, the namesake of the hotel that stands today at Lafayette and First Street.



1897 Sanborn Map

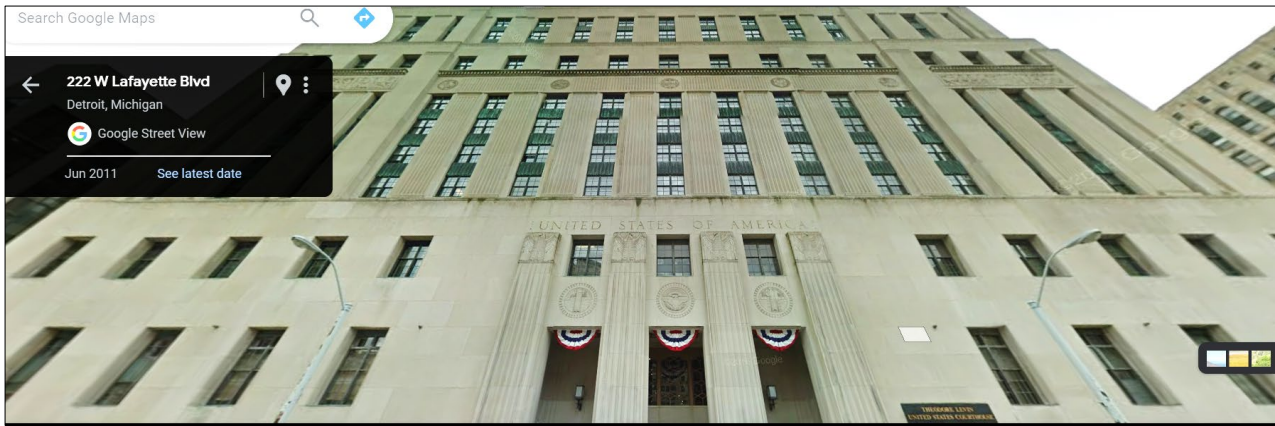


1920s era photo looking northwest from corner of Fort (l) and Shelby (r). 1915 addition is seen at far right. Burton Collection.



1921 Sanborn map. 1915 addition is at top.

- Detroit's growth continued at rapid rate. An addition, which filled the remaining north half of the city block, was erected in 1915.
- In 1930, Detroit had grown to the fourth-largest city in the country and boasted about 1.57 million people, an increase of more than 663% since construction of the building began in 1890.
- The government recommended that a new federal building be erected. Construction of the existing building began in 1932 and finished in 1934.



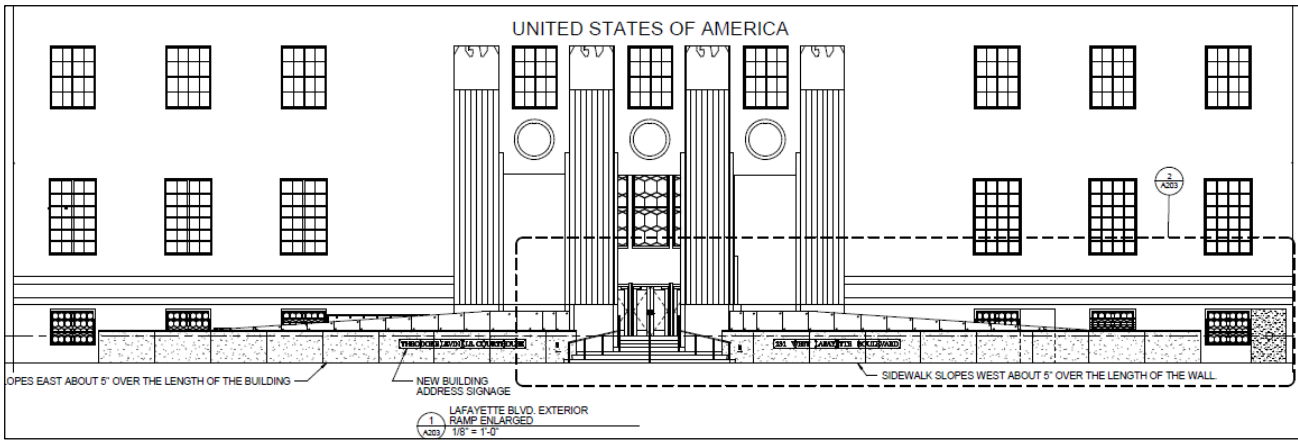
*Looking up at the W. Lafayette façade, Google street view.*

- It is staff's opinion the distinctive character-defining features of the building are its symmetrical design and repeating elements on all four sides – which are minimally detailed, restrained architectural ornamentation (i.e., stylized, fluted pilasters rather than columns, carved/recessed adornments between pilasters, and square or expansive horizontal carved panels in place of pilaster capitals), and a flat parapet.
- These are characteristic elements of a style sometimes referred to as “WPA (Works Progress Administration) Moderne”. This style of architecture emerged during the Depression and was incorporated into many public works projects as part of the New Deal initiative. It is a reinterpretation of a Beaux-Arts building with classical ornamentation that is highly stylized and minimally ornamented, combing the geometric styling of the 1920s Art Deco movement and the minimalism of the emerging International Style of architecture.



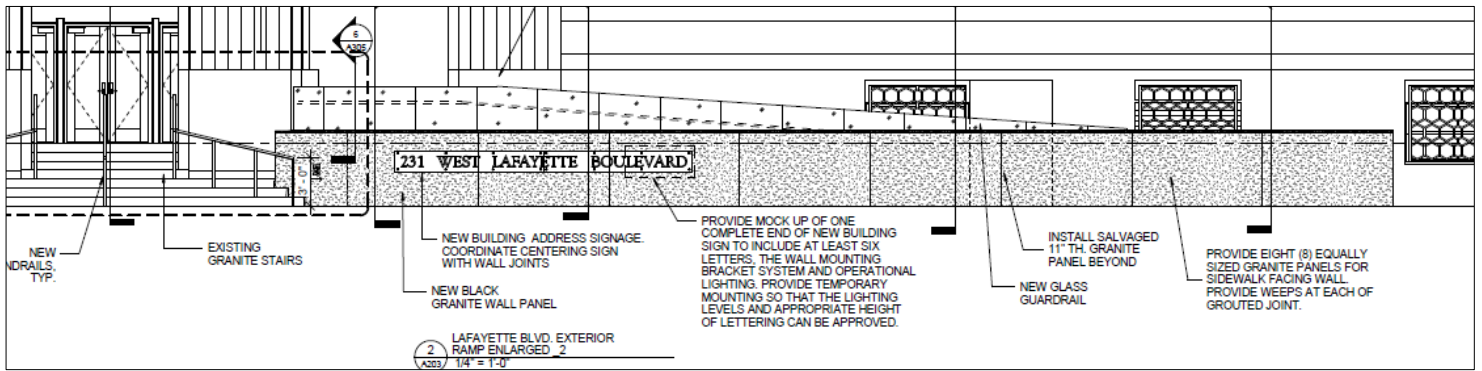
*Designation photos. HDAB, 2011.*





W. Lafayette façade, applicant elevation.

- The National Park Service’s [Technical Brief #32, Making Historic Properties Accessible](#), states an accessible route should be the circulation route used by the general public. Accessibility modifications should be in scale with the property, visually compatible, located in a way to minimize loss of historic features and where possible, be reversible.



Close-up elevation of ramp and steps, W. Lafayette façade.

- It is staff’s opinion the proposed ramps meet the guidelines discussed in the Technical Brief.
  - The ramps at the primary entrance will not remove distinctive features and materials that characterize the property.
  - The ramp walls will be faced with granite, similar to the material used on the lower walls of the building, helping the ramp to blend in with its surroundings.
  - Translucent glass panels used to enclose the ramp offer security while not blocking the view of the building beyond.
  - The interior walls of the ramps are angled towards the pilasters, creating a subtle enclosure of the stairs; the angled railings visually guide the eye towards the entry doors and create a sense of movement that balances the flanking ramps.



Staff included the applicant’s illustration to show how the materiality and design of the ramps fit against the existing building. The stair and railing design in this illustration have been revised. Please refer to the elevation drawings for the current angled step and railing design.

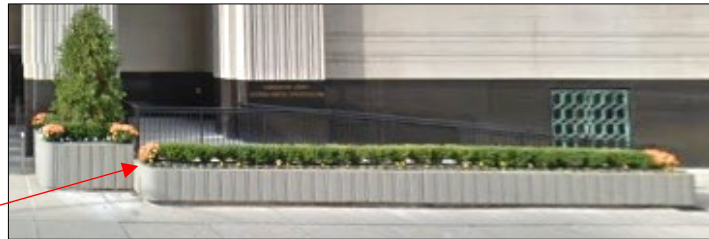


*Fort street façade. Staff photo.*

- The Fort Street entrance is the building’s secondary entrance which has one existing ramp that was in place at the time of historic district designation. No alterations are proposed for this ramp and staircase entrance.



*Fort Street Entrance. Google street view, October 2011.*



## ISSUES

- None.

## RECOMMENDATION

Staff finds that the proposal will not alter the features and spaces that characterize the property and district and therefore recommends the Commission issue a Certificate of Appropriateness for the work as proposed as it meets the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards and the Elements of Design for the district.