

MONTANA-DAKOTA UTILITIES BUILDING
(BILLINGS GAS COMPANY BUILDING)
2603 2nd AVENUE NORTH
BILLINGS, MONTANA
YELLOWSTONE COUNTY

HABS No. MT-120

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
DRAWINGS
FIELD RECORDS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDING SURVEY
Southwest System Support Office
National Park Service
P.O. Box 728
Santa Fe, New Mexico 87504

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

MONTANA-DAKOTA UTILITIES BUILDING (Billings Gas Company Building)

HABS No. MT-120

Location: This property is located at 2603 2nd Avenue North, at the northwest corner of the intersection of 26th Street and Second Avenue, in the downtown business district of Billings, in Yellowstone County, Montana.

USGS Billings West Quadrangle,
Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates: 12.694024.5072878

Present Owner: Big Sky Economic Development Authority
222 North 32nd Street, Suite 200
Billings, Montana 59101

Present Use: Vacant

Significance: The Montana-Dakota Utilities Building is significant for the supportive role the growing power company played in the development of Billings and for the strong clarity of architectural expression typical of the cross-over from simplified Art Deco to early American Imperial Modern. The building portrays the parallel expansion of the gas industry - represented by the Billings Gas Company and its 1950 merging partner, the Montana-Dakota Utilities Company – with the rapid population increase of the City of Billings. The physical presence of the building relays the solidity demanded of a service provider and the restraint expected of a lean company that has to justify rates to consumers. The reduction of the building's façade to simple necessary forms promotes the exclusion of elaborate ornamentation. The increased prefabrication predominant after World War II is manifested in the interiors, with the use of new materials and streamlined production processes. The sole exterior clue to this is the use of folding aluminum windows.

The Montana-Dakota Utilities Building was designed during post World War II affluence by one of Montana's premier architectural firms, J.G. Link & Company. It stands out among a body of fine, well-crafted designs the company produced during its long tenure from 1896 to 1985.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Date of erection: 1948¹

¹ "Gas Company Plans Move: Workmen Place Final Touches on Building," *The Billings Gazette*, December 20, 1948. Completion in 1948 is confirmed by the Sanborn Fire Insurance maps.

2. Architect: J.G. Link & Company

The Montana-based architecture firm of J.G. Link & Company (also under various previous names) was well known throughout Montana, Wyoming, Idaho, North & South Dakota, and Washington from 1896 when the founder J.G. Link began his practice in Montana until 1986 when his sons' firm was closed. John Gustave Link began his Montana career in 1896 with Montana State Architect J.C. Paulson, and after working with several other architects, formed a partnership with Charles S. Haire in 1905. This fruitful relationship yielded many prominent building designs throughout Montana – at the State Capitol Building, Montana State University, courthouses in numerous newly formed counties, and numerous office blocks in the burgeoning cities. When Haire passed away in 1930, Link formed the company of J.G. Link & Company, Architects & Engineers; his two sons, J.G. Link, Jr. and Elmer F. Link, joined him in business at this time. The firm specialized in schools, hospitals, churches, and commercial buildings.

J.G. Link & Company was productive throughout the late 1940s and 1950s, a robust period of growth in Montana; the firm reportedly had a volume of work valued at \$15 million from 1946 to 1949.² The firm was comfortable with the changing stylistic, material, and construction advances being made throughout the country, yet they were not experimental or leading the industry with avant-garde designs. They produced documents for buildings with good proportions, solid construction built to last, and finessed details, supported by a fine understanding of materials. Several of their designs in Billings remain: the James F. Battin Federal Building, St. Vincent's Hospital, McKinley School, and the Babcock Block. At the firm's closing in 1985, it was named Elmer F. Link & Associates, for the son who ran the Billings office.

3. Original and subsequent owners: Billings Gas Company, merged with the Montana-Dakota Utilities Company in 1950.

4. Builder, contractor, suppliers:³

General Contractor:	J.C. Boespflug Construction Co.
Lathing:	O.L. Aanes
Asphalt and Rubber Flooring:	Pierce Flooring Co.
Roofing and Sheet Metal:	Ryniker Steel Product Co.
Millwork Suppliers:	Billings Sash & Door Co.
Store Front, Glass and Glazing	Building Service, Inc.
Painting:	John Herzog
Ceramic Tile Flooring and Wainscot	Western Tile & Marble Co.
Ready Mix Concrete	Lohof Bros. Co.
Plumbing, Heating, and Air Conditioning:	Christensen Plumbing and Heating
Electrical Work:	Empire Electric Company

² "A Condensed Selection of Data and Pictures on Architectural Work," J.G. Link & Co., typewritten record from company files.

³ "Our Best Wishes to the Billings Gas Company on the completion of their new home and Their Grand Opening," *The Billings Herald*, January 27, 1949.

5. Original plans and construction: The following local newspaper account succinctly and accurately represents the construction process for, and original appearance of, the Montana-Dakota Utilities (MDU) Building:

“The site for the new building at 2605-2607 Second avenue north [sic] was acquired early in 1946 and its planning was started promptly. Denial of several applications for permission to build delayed start of construction until the building restrictions expired at the end of June, 1947. Plans were rushed to completion by the architects, J.G. Link and company, the contracts were let and construction began in November, 1947...

The building is two story and basement with over-all dimensions of 50 by 130 feet. The foundation, frame and floor and roof slabs are of steel-reinforced concrete. The front and two end elevations are faced with Indiana limestone above a granite base. The rear is faced with Billings brick and all outside walls are backed up with brick and hollow block. Interior partitions are of hollow block or insulated steel, the latter of movable design. All interior doors, door frames and baseboards are steel. Windows and entrance doors are aluminum.

Fluorescent lights recessed in the ceilings are used throughout the building, except in the corridors, and each room is equipped for individual temperature control. Most of the floors are covered with asphalt tile laid on the concrete slabs, that in the main lobby being rubber tile.”⁴

A perspective drawing of the building, by J.G. Link & Company, was featured in a 1948 local newspaper article about the construction of the building.⁵ The black-and-white rendering, depicting the view from the southeast, clearly illustrates the building as having a darker base material (granite): a lighter toned, regularly jointed finish above (limestone); multiple window openings regularly spaced; and the central ribbon of second floor windows above the main entry protected by an aluminum-clad canopy. The simple, slightly protruding cornice is evident, as are the two glass block-filled openings that demarcate the public interior stairway. The image’s caption highlights what were considered primary features: “...include aluminum folding draft-free windows, acoustical ceilings, fluorescent light fixtures and air-conditioning. The exterior will have a granite base and will be faced with light-colored Indiana limestone above this base. A pneumatic tube dispatch system will be installed.”⁶

In addition to the original construction delay, the formal opening was postponed due to: “Delay...of some details and in receipt of some equipment.”⁷ The Billings Gas Company moved into the building in early January 1949, opened for

⁴ “History of Gas Company Reviewed by President,” *The Billings Herald*, February 3, 1949.

⁵ “Construction Is Under Way on Billings Gas Company Building,” *The Billings Gazette*, January 4, 1948.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ “Gas Company Plans Move: Workmen Place Final Touches on Building,” *The Billings Gazette*, December 20, 1948.

business on Wednesday, January 5, and opened to the public on January 29 and February 1, 1949.⁸

According to J.G. Link & Company records, the construction of the Billings Gas Company building cost approximately \$225,000.⁹ Billings Gas Company president, J. E. Moore, indicated the great pleasure they received from the building after “some eight months of occupancy.”

“Two things in particular have impressed me from the time you received the commission to do the building for us: 1) the skill with which you have interpreted our wishes, translating them into a structure of enduring beauty and utility; 2) the effective supervision given to the construction to see that your plans were carried out to the last detail. The result has been most satisfactory to us and has elicited many admiring comments from local citizens and visitors in our city.”¹⁰

6. Alterations and additions: A drive-up payment booth was added onto the west end of the north façade after 1963.¹¹ Interior changes have been minimal:
 - a. First Floor: The original teller line across the north portion of the Lobby has been removed and in the 1980s, laminate-clad counters and cabinetry were installed closer to the entry, effectively narrowing the public portion of the Lobby. This cabinetry engages the original Lobby concrete columns that were originally wrapped with hemispherical counters. A raised reception area was installed at the east end of this new cabinetry, with entry from the north. It is probable that the quarry tile currently across the entry foyer was installed in the 1980s as well.¹²
 - b. First Floor, and minimally on Second Floor: Holes have been cut through the doors and transoms in order to insert plastic piping to function as conduits for wiring. This was presumably installed c.1980s.
 - c. Basement: A raised demonstration kitchen was constructed at the west end of the Employee Meeting Room before 1963 when alteration plans called for relocation of the original metal cabinetry to the Service Kitchen at the south side of the hallway. The cabinetry and floor finishes in the demonstration kitchen were updated c.1970s.
 - d. Throughout: The original light fixtures, which were recessed into the ceilings, have been removed and replaced with surface-mounted fluorescent 2 x 4 boxes over the original openings.
 - e. Entry storefront glazing: The original storefront glazing of large plate glass panes (two vertical panes each flanked the entry doors. The replacement aluminum storefront is comprised of nine regularly-spaced panes on either

⁸ Ibid.; “Our Best Wishes,” *The Billings Herald*, January 27, 1949; “An Invitation,” *The Billings Herald*, January 27, 1949.

⁹ J. G. Link & Company, List of Projects (undated), p. 5a. Montana State Historic Preservation Office architect files.

¹⁰ J.E. Moore, letter to J. G. Link & Company, September 29, 1949. In the J.G. Link & Company collection at the Western Heritage Center, Billings.

¹¹ The 1957 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map does not depict the addition. The 1963 J.G. Link & Co. alteration drawings do not include this booth.

¹² This conjectural statement is based upon review of the original construction documents (no historic photographs of the interior of the building were located), knowledge of the building’s style, and the type of finish flooring used throughout the remainder of the building.

side of the entry. The lower units directly above the granite base are filled with metal panels. The date of this change is unknown; it appears to be c.1980s.

- f. Front entry canopy: The original plaster soffit has been covered or replaced with pre-finished white aluminum. This appears to have been from the 1980s.
- g. Cornice: Sheet metal flashing has been installed over the front edge of the limestone cornice, slightly obscuring its original profile. It is unknown when the roofing work was performed; the flashing is crisp and in good condition, so it was probably installed c.1995.
- h. The garage doors have been removed and the openings filled in with brick (at the north opening) and cement boards in the two south openings. This modification was probably coincident with the construction of the drive-up window addition.

B. Historical Context:

The Billings Gas Company, a Montana corporation, was organized in 1912 by a group of Billings businessmen with the intent to: "...construct, maintain and to operate a plant for the manufacture, sale and distribution of illumination and fuel gas and their by-products..."¹³ The plant began production and delivery of carbureted water gas in the fall of 1912.¹⁴ This gas, which had a lower heat content and cost less than natural gas, was manufactured at the company's plant at the corner of 4th Avenue North and 19th Street in Billings. "The gas was made by heating coke or other fuel, then introducing steam in to the incandescent fuel bed. The result was blue water gas. This was enriched by spraying oil into the heated gas, giving it a higher heat content than water gas."¹⁵

In 1921, the Ohio Oil Company began organizing efforts to increase their presence in the gas production industry in the west. Their involvement ultimately led them to be the owner of the Billings Gas Company. The Ohio Oil Company was able to help finance the joint efforts of the Gallatin Natural Gas Company and the Billings Gas Company. In 1922, the Ohio Oil Company purchased a building to house all three entities; it was located in Billings at 105 North 27th Street.¹⁶

During this time, the Billings Gas Company was able to keep up with market trends in 1921 with a reorganization prompted by the purchase of the company's capital stock by the Gallatin Natural Gas Company. Through the Gallatin firm, the Ohio Oil Company had constructed a pipe line from the Elk Basin oil and gas field to northern Wyoming. This natural gas was then delivered and distributed by the Billings Gas Company.¹⁷ The company's distribution had expanded to 2,207 Billings customers at this time.¹⁸ After completion of the pipeline, distribution was expanded to Laurel, Bridge, and Fromberg in 1922; Edgar and Silesia in 1926; Park City in 1927; and Joliet in 1930. In 1933, Billings Gas bought the Gallatin company's property and disbanded the firm. Since the Ohio Oil Company had purchased all of the Gallatin company's stock, they became sole owner of

¹³ "Articles of Incorporation, Billings Gas Company," on file at the Clerk and Recorder's Office, Yellowstone County Courthouse, Billings, Montana.

¹⁴ "The Market Place," *The Billings Herald*, February 3, 1949.

¹⁵ "Storage Reservoir Saves City From Shortage of Natural Gas," *Yellowstone News*, February 2, 1956.

¹⁶ "The Market Place"

¹⁷ "The Market Place"

¹⁸ *Yellowstone News*

the Billings Gas Company at this time.¹⁹ This enabled the Billings Gas Company to use the entire building at 105 North 27th Street, which greatly facilitated their expanding business.

In 1941, the Billings Gas Company strove to attain capacity for the population/user base growth; they extended the gas supply beyond that previously obtained only from the Elk Basin field. The pipe line was extended to the Garland field in Wyoming; in 1947, a line extended to the South Elk Basin field. Further extensions increased the number of fields to six by 1949.²⁰

This growth necessitated construction of additions to the building in 1933 and 1941. Despite these accommodations to properly handle the concomitant volume of business, “Customers were inconvenienced by having to wait and the work in all departments was hampered by the limited space and awkward arrangement.”²¹ Thus, the Billings Gas Company began plans in 1946 for a new building at 2605-07 Second Avenue North, engaging J. G. Link & Company to design a building able to address twice the volume of business.²² The customer quantity had risen to 12,358 at the end of 1948, representative of Billings’ post World War II boom, much of which was related to the burgeoning oil business.

Selection of the architectural firm J.G. Link & Company was not surprising; given their pre-eminence throughout Montana since founder John Gustave Link had begun his architectural practice in Montana in 1896. At the time of his death in 1954, he had still been active in the firm, although his sons J.G. and Elmer held the primary responsibilities, in Butte and Billings, respectively. The various permutations of J.G. Link’s firms designed more than 1,000 buildings in Montana. At one time they had offices in Billings, Helena, Missoula, Butte, and Lewistown. John Sr.’s connections and reputation were a valuable aid throughout the firm’s history. John had been “...active in early-day oil development in the Byron oil field of Wyoming, the Cottonwood field of Carbon County and the Elk Basin field, at that time being regarded as a well-informed geologist.”²³ This probably contributed to the firm’s selection for the new Billings Gas Company building in 1946.

Schematic design drawings prepared by J.G. Link & CO. in 1946 illustrate an early design of similar size and proportions to what was ultimately built in 1948. However, the elevations were not as refined and the materials not as substantial. Walls of brick were accented with contrasting horizontal bands of concrete or stone. An arcaded entry was announced with a marquee that had a center prow extending over the sidewalk.

The schematic design images were supplemented by another – undated – design represented in a line rendering of a view from the southeast. A lower story of brick and large areas of plate glass were topped by a protruding second-story mass, at the southeast corner, of stone. All window openings were grouped – defined by large stone frames. Brick panels separated the paired windows.

¹⁹ “The Market Place”

²⁰ “The Market Place”

²¹ “The Market Place”

²² “The Market Place”

²³ “Pioneer Billings Architect Dies,” *The Billings Gazette*, January 6, 1954.

Decisions of material cost were still being considered when the project was bid for construction. The September 1947 bid documents included a base bid for a brick façade with stone windowsills. An alternate for stone facing included the same windows, entry, coping, and granite base, yet detailed the simple limestone cladding and coping.

In January 1948, the *Billings Gazette* featured a rendering of the new Billings Gas Company building, indicating that construction was underway and would be completed that October.²⁴ Construction had been delayed since 1946, due to “building restrictions” which had “...expired at the end of June, 1947.”²⁵ At this time, J.G. Link & Company was able to complete the plans and bid the project for a November 1947 construction start. Newspaper accounts listed the contractors and accurate descriptions of the building and its amenities.²⁶ The company moved furniture into the building in December 1948 and relocated their personnel into the building in early January 1949. The construction was reported to cost \$200,000. Delay in opening was attributed to completion of some details and postponed receipt of equipment.²⁷

Invitations to Open Houses on January 29 and February 1, 1949 were displayed in full-page advertisements in the *Billings Herald*. Grand statements demonstrated the parallel in growth between Billings and the Billings Gas Company: from 2,158 gas meters in 1920 to 12,358 meters in 1948. For effect, seven years of growth were shown in ever increasing font sizes. The modern building presented by the company was seen as a demonstration of their faith in the growth of Billings.²⁸

The ever-changing oil company world resulted in changes to the Billings Gas Company soon after they moved into their new headquarters building. In 1950, the company merged with the Montana-Dakota Utilities company, along with “...certain properties of the Rocky Mountain Gas company in northern Wyoming...”²⁹ The Montana-Dakota Utilities company was organized in 1924, with main offices in Minneapolis. The expanded customer base now included Billings, Laurel, Bridger, Fromberg, Edgar, Silesia, Park City, Joliet, and Belfry in Montana, and Elk Basin, Lovell, Cowley, Byron, Garland, and Powell in Wyoming. Local newspaper reports indicated:

“The Montana-Dakota Utilities company, needs no introduction to the people of Montana...This fine utility company has operated extensive electric and gas properties in Montana for the last 25 years. At the present time its operations include electric and natural gas properties throughout eastern and north-central Montana; western half of North Dakota; north-central part of South Dakota and the Sheridan and Buffalo district in Wyoming. The company also serves natural gas in Great Falls, Havre, Conrad and Glasgow areas and throughout the entire Black Hills area of South Dakota. At the present time the company serves 61 communities with natural gas and 199 communities with electricity.”³⁰

²⁴ “Construction is Under Way on Billings Gas Company Building,” *The Billings Gazette*, January 4, 1948.

²⁵ “The Market Place.” It is not known what these restrictions were; they do not appear to have influenced the size and appearance of the building.

²⁶ See A. Physical History for more information.

²⁷ “Gas Company Plans Move,” *The Billings Gazette*, December 30, 1948.

²⁸ “An Invitation...Open House,” *The Billings Herald*, January 27, 1949.

²⁹ “Billings Gas Company and Montana-Dakota Utilities Are Merged,” *The Billings Gazette*, September 21, 1950.

³⁰ “Billings Gas Company And Montana-Dakota Utilities Are Merged”

With this merger, vast gas resources in the Worland district were now available to the customers in the Billings area. The manager of the prior Billings Gas Company, J.E.Moore, continued as the president of what became known as the Billings division of the Montana-Dakota Utilities Company. The consolidation of the two firm's properties was lauded as a strategy to provide an ample supply of natural gas for many years.³¹

MDUs practice of taking large amounts of natural gas from the Worland pipeline during the summer months and storing it in the Elk Basin field as a reservoir for winter use helped the company meet the continued growing demand for gas in Billings. MDUs past experience in the natural gas business, which dated back to 1926, and the oil business, since discovering oil in the Williston Basin in 1936, positioned them well to be a combination company providing both natural gas and electricity.³² The merger with the Billings Gas Company "...added 16,000 gas customers with its new acquisitions and positioned itself for future growth in what community boosters called the Midland Empire."³³

The natural gas industry proved to be a lifeline for Billings, particularly as the homesteading period of the teens and 1920s ended. With the discovery of oil in mid-1915 and the subsequent growth, as evidenced by the growth of the Billings Gas Company and MDU, the "industry helped pull Billings through the 'bust' end of the homestead cycle and through the 1940s and 1950s became a lynchpin of the local economy."³⁴

In 2008, MDU moved out of their downtown building and into a new facility at 5181 Southgate Drive in Billings. This relocation facilitated MDUs consolidation of its customer service, administration, and warehouse operations. The Big Sky Economic Development Authority purchased the 2nd Avenue property for \$750,000 in 2007 to "encourage the development of a new federal courthouse that will replace federal offices in the nearby asbestos-tainted James F. Battin Federal Courthouse,"³⁵ as facilitated by the demolition of the building. The various materials have been salvaged from the building for recycling or reuse as needed elsewhere throughout the community: limestone, granite, aluminum, copper, and steel.

³¹ "Billings Gas Company And Montana-Dakota Utilities Are Merged"

³² "Storage Reservoir Saves City From Shortage of Natural Gas"

³³ Bill Beck, *The Mondakonians Energizers of the Prairie* (Bismarck, ND: MDU Resources Group, 1922).

³⁴ Chere Jiusto, "Tales Spun Along the Tracks: A History of Downtown Billings" (Yellowstone Historic Preservation Board, 1998), p.13.

³⁵ Casey Riffe, "Billings developer struggles against publicly-funded Big Sky EDA," *The Billings Gazette*, November 10, 2007.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The MDU building is a refined and elegant expression of the Modern age which reflects classical standards and strategies, yet condenses the detailing down to the minimum. The latest materials available at the time – the folding aluminum windows, the perforated ceiling tiles and moldings, the metal partition walls, the metal doors with molded trim – are used in classical modes that render them nearly invisible, unless studied. The building is intended to blend with those around it and present solidity. The cleanly punched regularly-spaced openings in the plain limestone façade provide a sense of openness and approachability, while transmitting ample natural light into the interiors.

The “style” of this building reflects a burgeoning America. Billings parallels this growth, hence classifying the building as the Early American Imperial Modern - a style coined by Alan Gowans in *Styles and Types of North American Architecture: Social Function and Cultural Expression* - supports the socio-economic role the company – and its built manifestation – played in the community and the state.

2. Condition of fabric: The condition of the building is excellent and all character-defining features retain a high degree of integrity.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The MDU Building is a classic rectangular mass of two stories, with a full height from the first floor level to the top of the cornice of 26'-8". The long entry elevation is approximately 130' long; the short ends are approximately 50' long. The public entry is defined by a 42'-wide bay that protrudes slightly from the plane of the elevation.
2. Foundations: Reinforced concrete foundation walls range from 1'-0" to 1'-2" thick, with the latter dimension being prevalent.
3. Walls: The exterior walls are of brick infill between the concrete columns. The building is composed of the classical base, shaft, and capital – in an elegantly simplistic fashion. On the primary facades – west, south, and east - the exterior wall is divided into the granite base, the limestone shaft, and the limestone coping. The prevalent granite base is a smooth, polished light-colored stone with large flecks of white, black, and light pink stone typical of the Minnesota Cold Spring Granite. This base is approximately 2'-8" above grade and has a distinct top bevel that is terminated at the north façade. The granite at the entry bay is distinguished in that it acts as a taller base for the protruding stone of the bay, then as a narrow band surrounding the aluminum curtain wall of the arcaded (recessed and angled) entry. This granite is a striking Carnelian Red.³⁶

The shaft wall finish is of smooth Indiana limestone ashlar set primarily in a stacked bond, with variations in vertical coursing only as required to accommodate wider spacing flanking the windows. The capital is of smooth Indiana limestone as well, with a folded plate trim below an ogee molding. The scale of this trimwork is large enough to be clearly perceived from the street level.

³⁶ This coloration is based upon the author's experience with granite; it is not from original material specifications or other records.

The exterior finish for the north wall is of a standard-sized brick, set in a running bond, apparent as infill between the concrete structural members. The reddish-toned brick is currently painted, but does not appear to have been painted originally. The concrete structure is also painted.

4. Structural system, framing: The entire building was considered fireproof at the time of construction. It has a reinforced concrete frame of columns, beams, and floors. The roof is of concrete, yet clay book tile is the visible structure for the garage ceiling and is located above the ceilings of the suite of rooms west of the public stairway.
5. Entry canopy: A 20'-tall 8'-deep canopy is located 10'-9" above grade at the front entry. The fascia is covered with a reeded aluminum that gracefully wraps the corners. This steel-framed canopy shows no visible signs of support, rendering it a sleek plane between the long spans of window and door openings above and below. This key element of the façade helps tie together the related components of the central bay.
6. Chimneys: A brick chimney is located at the north elevation, west of the building's center, on a wall shared with the Boiler Room in the basement. It provided a flue for the exhaust.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The two primary doors are located on the south elevation; both are aluminum storefront doors with large areas of glazing and transoms. The public entry doors are a pair recessed within an angled commercial storefront entry with full-height and full-width glazing set in aluminum framing. The door to the public stairway is recessed as well, within a non-angled opening. The doors have standard hollow aluminum trim and framing.

Two hollow metal service doors have been installed at the west end of the building: one to access the erstwhile garage, and one to enter the payment booth. The door to the garage has a vision lite; the latter door is a solid panel.

- b. Windows: The windows are a prominent feature of the building, in their regularity and symmetry within distinct bays of the building, in the clean fashion within which they're placed in the punched masonry openings, in their glossy finish, and in their function. The primary windows are "folding" as noted in the newspaper description above; they fold out with hinges mounted in the vertical center of the sash. According to the window inscription, they are Humphrey Tension-Sealed aluminum windows.³⁷ They are operated with hand-cranks mounted through the interior sill, and locked with an interior lever at the center hinge stiles. Aluminum windows did not become standard construction fare until the 1950s; this use in the MDU Building is considered an early use of a modern material.

The arrangement of these windows varies throughout the building, with hierarchy being given to the windows on the south façade above the entry canopy. These eight windows are set in a ribbon fashion in one large punched opening. The dividing wall between the two rooms behind this opening is detailed to provide the illusion of one large space behind this large opening, in keeping with expectations. The remainder of the windows are located singly, paired, and in groups of three and four.

³⁷ Humphrey Windows is still extant. Their website (www.humphreyproducts.com) indicates that they've been fabricating windows since the early 1930s.

With the exception of the windows at the west elevation and the majority of the windows on the north elevation, each sash half has three lites, with horizontal muntins located on the quarter-points. The west elevation window sash halves are divided vertically into four equal panes. Most of the north elevation window sash halves are divided vertically into three equal panes. The true divisions of the primary sash are often obscured by the location of the one-over-one double-hung aluminum interior storm sash located at most windows. The storm units have integral screens.

The windows are neatly set into the stone exterior and plaster interior finish walls, trimless. The aluminum stools completely wrap the sill and form the apron, with a single reveal in the profile. The crank arm extends from the front of the stool. The exterior sill is granite at the first floor of the primary elevations, and aluminum at the second floor. The north elevation has brick rowlock sills.

The interior public stairway is demarcated by glass block infill at wide openings in the first and second floors of the south elevation. This 8" x 8" block is clear, but vision is obscured by the use of alternating grooves on each side of the block.

8. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: The flat roof is concealed behind a parapet and covered with a membrane roofing material sloped to internal drains. Overflow scuppers are located at the north side of the building.
- b. Cornice: A smooth Indiana limestone cornice caps the primary facades of the building. The large ogee profile is located over a shallow-angled folded plate shaped trim. The north side of the building has a concrete coping.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: The floor plate is essentially a long rectangle, with a 58'-long indent recessed 4' into the center of the north side. The over-arching configuration is of a double-loaded corridor running the length of the building, terminating at the large full-width spaces at each end of the building. The first floor is at grade and provides street access to a large Lobby and to a public stairway that accesses all three floors; thus it uses the double-loaded corridor for only a short length. A second set of stairs at the east end of the first floor provides access only to the basement.

The first and second floors each have restrooms opposite the stairway, stacked for ease of plumbing. The second floor epitomizes the typical office layout with offices located on either side of the corridor. The corridor here extends to the east end of the building, terminating at a wall with an exterior window. A suite of offices is located at the west end of the second floor.

The basement contains larger rooms in the central portion of the building, with large areas dedicated to employee use and storage, and an adjacent space used as a kitchen. The Boiler Room is opposite the public (west) stairway. The west end of the basement was not excavated and is inaccessible.

The finish floor to ceiling heights are as follows (see Wall and Ceiling Finish below for discussion of soffits and ceiling types):

- Basement: Range from 7'-4" to 9'-5".
- First Floor: Range from 9'-7" to 10'-0".
- Second Floor: Range from 8'-3" to 9'-7".

2. Stairways: The public stairway that accesses all three floors is of steel pan construction, except for the bottom flight of poured concrete. This scissor stair has landings at the south wall, illuminated with natural light through the glass blocks. The balustrades are comprised of square steel newel posts, with narrowed tops, and square posts which support flat plate rails. The top rail is capped with a 2¼" wide brass (¾" thick) plate. The steel is painted white. The tread finish is a continuation of the vinyl tile flooring in the stair lobby; the nosings, stringers, and risers are of painted steel.

The single flight stairway towards the east end of the basement is of painted concrete with partial vinyl or rubber treads. The clear-finish round birch handrails are secured to the walls with handrail brackets.

3. Flooring: The concrete floors of the first and second floor are covered with wall-to-wall carpeting, except in the entry foyer (to the Lobby), public stair hall, second floor hallway, and the restrooms. A 4"-tall steel base with bullnose top has a rabbeted bottom to receive the finish flooring. The floor immediately adjacent to the recessed entryway is finished with 6" x 6" red quarry tile with a bullnose and coved base; this material is not consistent with the original finishes in the building.³⁸ The stair hall lobby and second floor hallway flooring is of a patterned resilient tile comprised of a 9" square asphalt tile with a brown outer border, tan inside border, and tan and brown orthogonal checkerboard field.

The restrooms floors are finished with a mosaic ceramic tile of varying square and rectangular pieces based on a ¾" module. Coloration is warm, with deep orange, brown, terra cotta, and a dark olive green seemingly randomly placed throughout.

The garage end of the first floor is of exposed, unpainted concrete. The basement floors continue the asphalt tile expression in the main stairway, hallway, kitchen, Employee Meeting Room, and storage room to the south. The latter two rooms carry only the checkerboard field; they do not continue the border pattern. The base is of 4" vinyl tile. The remainder of the rooms – the east storage space, the Boiler Room, and the adjacent toilet room – have exposed concrete floors.

4. Wall and ceiling finish:
 - a. Wall finishes: Smooth plaster walls finish all the rooms except several at the second floor offices, the restrooms, the Garage, and the Boiler Room and east Storage Room in the basement. The plaster is applied directly to the clay tile substrate of the exterior walls and to expanded metal lath on the interior walls. The outside corners have rounded, eased edges.

The office suite at the west end of the second floor (and one wall in the north office suite) is partitioned with insulated steel wall panels. A steel frame of 2½" wide supports and

³⁸ The first floor plan of the 1947 construction document set depicts a rubber tile set in herringbone pattern with dark diamond transition tiles; this striking flooring was throughout the first floor lobby and teller area.

flat 6" base support 8'-4½" tall panels that vary in width from 2'-3" to 3'-9". Such panels were typical of modern buildings in the 1950s and 1960s; this is an early use of this system that was considered demountable and flexible. Wiring was run through the metal support tubes.

The restroom walls are finished with ceramic tile up to 5'-10½" above the finished floor; with a smooth plaster finish on the walls above. The tile is a 4" x 4" cushioned wall tile with a 6" long bullnose cap, a 6" long black listel tile, and a 6" long cove base tile. The tile surrounds the window jambs and sills. The tile, other than the thin trim tile, is a cream color with orange specks.

The garage walls represent the variety of wall construction materials in the building: painted clay tile at the exterior walls, the painted concrete masonry units at the added mechanical room in the northeast corner, and the painted pressed board partition between the north and south rooms.

- b. Ceiling finishes: The ceilings in the offices and public spaces throughout the building retain the original finish treatment of 12" x 12" acoustical perforated fiberboard tiles set orthogonally in a field surrounded by a mitered border of smooth (unperforated) fiberboard or plaster.³⁹ The borders vary based upon the hierarchy of the space. The Lobby has a wide plaster border with wide cove molding (for a total of approximately 2-feet) and frieze on the wall below. This treatment is identical on either side of the coffered beam that spans the width of the space above where the teller line was originally located. The central hallway west of the Lobby has a similar ceiling treatment, yet without the frieze. The offices and main stair hall ceilings have a plain 12" border with simple convex crown. The east end of the second floor hallway ceiling rises from the typical 8'-3" height to 9'-5" to clear the window. These types of perforated tiles, moldings, and friezes had been available since the 1930s; yet they were not heavily used until the 1940s.

The restrooms have smooth plaster ceilings. The garage ceilings are of exposed structural clay tile.

With the exception of the main stair hall ceiling (which is smooth plaster) and the east storage room (which is exposed concrete), the basement ceiling finishes are a simplified version of the office ceilings on the floors above. The 12" x 12" perforated tiles are glued directly to the concrete ceilings and are not contained within borders. Plaster soffits border the ceilings of the two large finished basement rooms. The registers at the face of the soffits represent supply and return from the ductwork concealed by the soffits. A perforated tile soffit is located at the south wall in the room west of the Service Kitchen.

5. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: The doors and trim throughout the building, with the exception of the garage area, are of hollow and cold-drawn metal, respectively, with a glossy faux-grained multi-coat enamel finish; this system contributed to the 'fireproof' designation stated on the Sanborn Fire Insurance maps. The typical door is one flush panel, 3' wide

³⁹ The perforated tiles are nailed to wood furring strips.

and 7' tall. The typical 3¼"-wide casing has an elaborate profile indicative of Colonial Revival style trim. Its 1"-projection from the wall enhances this appearance.⁴⁰

The doors at the office suite at the west end of the second floor have simple metal 2" hollow metal frames and flat casings with the same faux-grained finish as the doors and other trim. These doors also have matching metal transom panels.

Some of the office doors are glazed. Double-swing doors at each side of the second floor stairway lobby are fully glazed and have operable glazed transoms.

The garage has both hollow core flush wood doors and plain hollow metal doors.

- b. Windows: The windows are as described in the Exterior Description. The interior stools are aluminum bent to form the stool, a reveal, and an apron. The standard sill height, at the first and second floor, is 2'-11½" above the finished floor. The windows are 6'-6¼" high.

Due to the nature of the building configuration, every room is provided with natural light from numerous windows. The windows also provide ample fresh air, with interior screen protection.

6. Decorative features and trim: The building is simply and consistently treated with understated trim as noted above. The basement Service Kitchen is furnished with cabinetry that was originally located in the raised demonstration kitchen across the hallway.⁴¹ The enameled steel cabinetry – both base and upper cabinets – feature curved edges and chrome-plated brass latches and hinges. The cabinets were manufactured by Lyon.⁴²
7. Hardware: The typical door hardware package includes a Corbin solid brass full-mortise locking latchset with a 2¼" diameter knob and a ¼"-thick 4"-square escutcheon plate with beveled edges. Some of the doors have a Corbin closer. The hinges are bronze-plated steel five-knuckle ball bearing ball-tip hinges by Stanley. Typically the 1½ hinges per door are 4½" x 4½". The finish of the hardware in the restrooms is polished chrome. The wood doors have cylinder locksets.
8. Mechanical equipment:
 - a. Heating, air conditioning, ventilation: The building is heated by recessed radiators with metal covers that are located under most of the windows in each room. The radiators are fed with hot water from the American Standard gas-fired boiler in the basement (input of 180,000 Btuh). Cooling is provided by a Marlo Fan air conditioner located in the boiler room and distributed through judiciously located soffited ducts in select rooms. A stacked chase is located between the two restrooms, above the Boiler Room. Each space is individually controlled.

⁴⁰ The door details on Sheet 3 of the original construction documents identify the intended door, frame, and trim manufacturer as Dahlstrom. Dahlstrom Metallic Metal Door Company of Jamestown, NY was established in 1904 and continues to operate today. The company made this same door profile in 1915 (Frank E. Kidder, *Building Construction and Superintendence*. Binghamton, NY: The Vail-Ballow Company, 1915)

⁴¹ The 1963 Basement Alterations & Additions drawings include the relocation of this Lyon metal cabinetry.

⁴² Metal identification tag on the cabinets identifies the manufacturer as Lyon, of Aurora, IL and York, PA.

- b. Lighting: The original lighting was distributed evenly throughout the first and second spaces (with the exception of the garage), with 2' x 4' fixtures recessed into most of the ceilings; the lenses were flush with the ceiling. None of these remain. Replacement surface-mounted 2' x 4' fluorescent fixtures have been mounted at each of the original locations. Ghost markings remain where five original 10" x 10" shallow-box recessed light fixtures were located along the center of the second floor (east) hallway. The original ganged 2' x 4' surface-mounted fluorescent fixtures remain in the two large rooms of the basement; the lenses which wrap each fixture have yellowed.

The original illumination at the arcaded entry, however, is very like that at a typical commercial enterprise. A series of eight 10"-diameter adjustable spotlights parallels each of the angled storefront walls. Set in a few feet from the wall, the lighting is the type used to accent displays. These rounded conical fixtures are of polished aluminum, in keeping with the other materials used in the building.

- c. Plumbing: The building has four original restrooms, stacked at the first and second floors across from the main stairway. Most of the original Crane white porcelain enamel cast iron fixtures remain: the janitor's sinks and floor-length urinals in the Men's Rooms, and the water closets in all rooms. The toilets have been fitted with flush valves. The wall-hung sinks in the Men's Rooms are replacement fixtures, and the Women's Rooms have been fitted with vanities with over-counter sinks and single-handle combination faucets.
- d. Autocall system: Evidence of the original Autocall "Executive" system remains at two stations mounted in the main second floor hallway. This system was manufactured by the Autocall Company of Shelby, Ohio. It is presumed that this is some sort of broadcast system to alert employees in this section of the building only.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: This rectangular building is located with the long entry elevation facing south towards Second Avenue. The building is built within inches of the lot lines, to the edge of the sidewalk. The property to the north is dedicated to surface parking and the property to the west is a simply landscaped park with green grass and deciduous trees. The site is relatively flat, with a slight slope down in grade from west to east. The primary pedestrian approach to the building is from the south sidewalk to the front entry centered below the canopy. A drive-up ticket window at the northwest corner of the building is accessed from the aisle in the parking lot. The former garage (now storage) space at the west end of the building is accessed by a single man door.
2. Historic landscape design: The building is surrounded by pavement: concrete sidewalks at the south and east, and asphalt paving for drive lanes and parking to the north and west.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- A. Original Architectural Drawings: J.G. Link & Company Architects and Engineers. "Architectural Drawings of Office Building for Billings Gas Company," Montana Architectural Drawing Database, Merrill G. Burlingame Special Collections, MSU Libraries, Bozeman, Montana. Collection #2220, Drawing Set #370, dated 1946-1963.

B. The drawings are summarized as follows:

Set	Date	Sheet No.	Description	Comments
Early scheme	6/20/46	--	Basement Floor Plan	Similar to final, but not exact
Early scheme	6/20/46	--	First Floor Plan	Similar to final, but not exact.
Early scheme	6/20/46	--	Second Floor Plan	Similar to final, but not exact.
Early scheme	7/8/46	--	S & E elevations, Cross Section (Doesn't correspond to rendering)	Brick with stone banding (very horizontal); steel bar joists and steel beams.
--	--	--	Pencil or ink perspective rendering of what could have been planned to be the Billings Gas Company. Same massing as existing building. Image from southeast. Depicts future considerably taller modern building immediately to the north (was not there previously and never was built).	Brick depicted at typical wall, with limestone or concrete at second story protruded plane. Ribbon window openings blocked out with heavy contour trim in 1950s fashion.
Job 4710	9/26/47	1	Foundation Plan 1. Large footings under columns	
Job 4710	9/26/47	2	Basement Plan 1. Hosp. Rm 1 (north) as employee meeting room 2. Hosp. Rm 2 labeled as storage – no attached Service Kitchen.	
Job 4710	9/26/47	3	First Floor Plan 1. Herringbone rubber tile for first floor entry and teller area. 2. Most other offices finished with asphalt tile with metal base. 3. Manager and Steno offices with carpet. 4. Plaster walls and acoustical tile ceilings typical. 5. Dahlstrom profiled door frames.	

Set	Date	Sheet No.	Description	Comments
Job 4710	9/26/47	4	Second Floor Plan 1. Indicates movable metal partitions in the office area west of the stairs and in the north center office. 2. Offices to have asphalt tile floor with metal base, plaster walls and acoustical tile ceilings.	1. South wall 6" north of PL 2. East wall 2" west of PL 3. North wall on PL 4. West PL not indicated
Job 4710	9/26/47	5	Roof Plan & Plot Plan 1. Long east roof slopes to two cast iron downspouts with overflow scuppers at north. 2. West roof slopes to cast iron downspout with overflow scupper at east projection. 3. Attic ventilator, evaporative condenser, and Allen turbine exhaust shown.	
Job 4710	9/26/47	6	S, E, & W Elevations	1. Use of Truscon Steel window sash. 2. Stone coping and stone base 3. Face Brick 4. Stone windowsills
Job 4710	9/26/47	6A	"Elevations and Details for Stone Facing Alternate" S, E, & W Elevations Cornice detail	1. Indicates granite coping (not as built), limestone facing, and granite base course 2. Aluminum windowsills 3. All openings the same as Sheet 6
Job 4710	9/26/47	7	Typ. Section S & E walls – 4 ½" limestone cladding. North Elevation – difference between common brick and face brick	
Job 4710	9/26/47	8	Longitudinal Section, showing teller counters Cross Section, showing counters Details at counter at cols C-7 & C-10.	Tellers and column counters gone.

Set	Date	Sheet No.	Description	Comments
Job 4710	9/26/47	9	Plan at Main Entrance F-H wall Section with awning Garage door details	Cement plaster shown as ceiling of awning
Job 4710	9/26/47	10	North wall section. Tellers Counters details.	
Job 4710	9/26/47	11	Details of Main Stairs	As exist
Job 4710	11/26/47	12	“This sheet shows changes in toilet room floor & piping, due to location of city sewer.”	Toilet room by mechanical room.
Job 4710	4/28/48 rev. 8- 26-48	--	1. Full scale detail of cols C-7 & C-10 in Rm 101. Molded Plaster Finish. 2. Full scale detail of ceil. Plas. Cornice Rms 101 & 105.	7½” cyma recta cornice with 12” inside border, and recessed beads at 7” tall frieze
None, but seems to be of 4710 set	6-8-48 Rev. 9- 1-48	--	1. Full scale detail of furred beam over tellers counter	Show 7x10 air conditioning duct within.
	9/3/48	--	Cornice Det. Full Scale Room 206 & 219	Looks like the extant cornice.
Demonstration Kitchen for M- DU	--	--	1. Installation of raise flooring in n.w. corner of north hospitality room, with 2x4s. 2. Existing duct furring (at soffit) 3. Valence at step edge as there now. 4. Had linoleum countertops and backsplashes with metal edges. 5. Metal cabinets to be by Lyon Metal Products, Inc. [same as those currently in the smaller kitchen.]	New fixtures have been installed in new locations, new finishes, and new cabinets.
Basement Alteration & Additions M-DU	Revised 7/6/63	1	1. Create Hospitality Rm 1 & 2 2. Relocate metal Lyon cabinets from Demonstration Kitchen to Service Kitchen. 3. Hosp 1 already plastered. 4. Plaster walls installed in Hosp 2 as part of this project. 5. Service Kitchen, walls, and countertop built into west part of Hosp. Room #2. 6. S. Kitchen: New soffit for ducts and exhaust.	Creation of Service Kitchen w/ cabinets from Demonstration Kitchen supported by existence of white metal Lyon cabinets in Service Kitchen.
Basement Alteration & Additions MD-U	July 25, 1963	E-1	1. New lighting for Hosp 1 & 2. 2. Reused 18 of 2/40 fluorescent fixtures from Hosp 1 in Hosp. 2.	Stamped by Alvin D. Swanson, professional engineer

Set	Date	Sheet No.	Description	Comments
Basement Alteration & Additions M-DU	1958 (hand-written)	2	1. Enclosure of SW portion of garage – stud wall and door. 2. New lighting for SE basement large (hospitality) room & kitchen to west.	Includes Fixture Schedule with Make and Model No.

C. Early Views:

1. c.1946: Rendering by J.G. Link & Company, of the Billings Gas Company building, from the southeast facing northwest. Image located in the Western Heritage Center Collection, Billings, Montana. The final design held very true to this depiction, with the exception of a slight modification to the cornice. The cornice in this view appears to be less pronounced. Note: this same image was used in the January 4, 1948 issue of the *Billings Gazette* to announce that the construction of the building was underway.
2. c.1948: Photograph of the construction of the Billings Gas Company building, from the southeast facing northwest. Image clearly shows the concrete frame and window openings. The caption states: “Photo by Forney, taken through the window at No. 6 Curtis Apts, by courtesy of Mrs. William Meshler.” In the “Gas, Natural” business file at the Billings Library. (This is believed to misattributed to a May 15, 1949 article in the *Billings Herald*, as the building was completed in late December 1948.)
3. 1948: Photograph of interior office in the Billings Gas Company building. This appears to be at the north side of the second floor, looking west. Image located in the Western Heritage Center Collection, Billings, Montana.
4. c.1949: Photograph of the Billings Gas Company building, from the southeast facing northwest. Image located in the Western Heritage Center Collection, Billings, Montana. The original “Billings Gas Company” sign, comprised of individual block letters – probably in aluminum – is mounted atop the front of the canopy.

D. Interviews: None

E. Bibliography:

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F. Likely Sources Not Yet Investigated:

1. No permit records are on file at the City of Billings, Montana.
2. MDU company files might yield more information.
3. MSU Libraries Merrill G. Burlingame Special Collections, Bozeman, Montana. Per archivist Kim Allen Scott, the collection contains eleven boxes of J.G. Link & Co. papers from 1930-1950. This collection contains specifications and letters; it is not inventoried.

G. Supplemental Material: Rendering and early photographs, as listed in Early Views above.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This HABS recordation project was undertaken to fulfill the terms of the memorandum of agreement by and among the Montana State Historic Preservation Office and the General Services Administration concerning the construction of the General Services Administration's Billings U.S. District Courthouse at the corner of North 26th Street and 2nd Avenue North in Billings, Yellowstone County, Montana. The subject agreement was developed to ensure compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (36 CFR Part 800) for the General Services Administration's construction undertaking.

This project was facilitated by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act Project. Lesley M. Gilmore, Director of Historic Preservation Services at CTA Architects Engineers, Inc. performed the research, documented the building, and authored this written description and history. Paul Whiting of Paul Whiting Photography provided the current photographs of the building. The services for this project were provided for the General Services Administration, per their Notice to Proceed on August 24, 2009. The General Services Administration project personnel were as follows:

Project Manager: Michelle Ransome
Contracting Officer: Kay Thompson
Project Assistant: Duane Krueger
Regional Historic Preservation Officer: Andrea K. Collins

The project was commenced in September 2009 and completed in March 2010. The documentation was revised in September 2010 to align the formatting with national HABS standards and guidelines, per the request of the Intermountain Region Historian of the National Park Service in Denver, Colorado.

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Photographer: Paul Whiting

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PHOTOGRAPH NO. MT-120.3





































