

Cincinnati Union Terminal,  
Mail Handling Building  
Bounded by vacated McLean Avenue,  
Sherman Avenue, vacated Liberty Avenue  
and the Conrail railroad tracks  
Cincinnati  
Hamilton County  
Ohio

HABS No. OH-705-A

HABS  
OHIO  
31-CINT  
29-A

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
MID-ATLANTIC REGION, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE  
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA 19106

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

CINCINNATI UNION TERMINAL,

MAIL HANDLING BUILDING

HABS NO. OH-705-A

HABS  
3822,  
38-CINT,  
29-A-

Location: The block bounded by vacated McLean Avenue, Sherman Avenue, vacated Liberty Avenue and the Conrail railroad tracks. It is situated directly west of the Dalton Street Post Office and is located within the City of Cincinnati, Hamilton County, Ohio.

USGS Covington, Kentucky Quadrangle, Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates: 16.711920. 4532080

Present Owner: The City of Cincinnati, Real Estate Department  
City Hall  
810 Plum Street  
Cincinnati, Ohio 45202

Present Occupant: Vacant.

Significance: This building is part of a grouping of structures erected as part of one of the most monumental complexes in America in the Art Deco style. The passenger terminal, as recorded by HABS as OH-705, is the centerpiece of the complex and is widely regarded as an example of monumental Art Deco public architecture, representing an early break with Neoclassical traditions with its unique dome form. While the mail handling building is clearly subordinate to the passenger terminal, it is related by virtue of its styling, massing and use of materials. The building is also significant for its role in mail distribution and in the history of railroad transportation of the mails.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Date of Erection: 1932-1933. The property was transferred to the Cincinnati Union Terminal Company early in 1932 and the entire complex was completed the following year. Photographs of the Mail Handling Building appear in a dedication brochure dated 1933.
2. Architects: Alfred Fellheimer and Steward Wagner of New York City (dedication brochure and National Register nomination form) were the architects of the Terminal. Edgar D. Tyler was the architect of the Mail Handling Building (from the enclosed newspaper article).
3. Original and subsequent owners: The following is a complete chain of title beginning after the property was condemned by the City of Cincinnati under eminent domain proceedings. Reference is to the Hamilton County Recorder's Office, Cincinnati, Ohio.

The Property is in C.W. Starbuck's Heirs Subdivision Case 29390 C.P.C., Plat Book 4, page 65R.O.

1932 Deed February 4, 1932, recorded February 4, 1932 in Book 186, Page 1-1  
The City of Cincinnati, Hamilton County, Ohio  
To  
The Cincinnati Union Terminal Company, Hamilton County, Ohio

1977 Deed July 20, 1977, recorded July 20, 1977 in Deed Book 4091, Page 52  
To  
The City of Cincinnati

4. Contractor, Engineer:
  - a. Contractor: A.M. Stewart was the general contractor for the Cincinnati Union Terminal. This firm was headquartered in New York City. The company was also listed as James Stewart and Company, Inc.
  - b. Engineer: Colonel Henry M. Waite, chief engineer for the Cincinnati Union Terminal Company, supervised the design and construction of this building

and all other aspects of the Cincinnati Union Terminal project. His special engineering staff included twenty-two individuals, listed in the dedication brochure. J.B. Sullivan was the assistant engineer in charge of the Mail Handling Building project.

5. Original plans and construction: No original drawings or specifications are known to City of Cincinnati has no plans or other written information on this building. Historic photographs taken shortly after the building's completion show its original external and internal appearance. They have been copied for inclusion in this report.
6. Alterations: The equipment originally inside the building which was used to sort and distribute the mails has all long since disappeared. Two overhead covered passageways used to convey mail to the passenger terminal and to the nearby post office have also been removed. Scars on the side of this building indicate where they once attached. The mail loading platforms which were on the north side of this building are also long gone. Otherwise the building is largely intact, except for deterioration. This deterioration consists of large areas of missing roof, missing pipe and generally water-damaged surfaces throughout, although the basic structure is still intact.

B. Historical Context:

The Mail Handling Building was erected as part of the Cincinnati Union Terminal Complex. At the core of this massive railroad center was the grand passenger terminal. The Mail Handling Building was one of a number of smaller buildings which were erected to take advantage of this area's status as a major transportation node in the era when railroads were at the core of the nation's intercity transportation network. By the time of this building's erection, a strong bond had been formed between the railroads and the postal system. Trains were by the early twentieth century a primary means of moving the mails. This building was used as a regional sorting center, handling mails not just for Cincinnati but for other points as well. It was a major transfer station for the postal department. Mails were unloaded from various trains onto platforms located just north of here and also

from the passenger terminal via a long enclosed overhead conveyor. They were then taken to a central point in the clerestory area of the building and directed to their proper platform for shipment out on other trains to their proper destination. Mail bound for Cincinnati and its region was shipped by overhead conveyor directly into the post office (which was built about 1935) which stands just east of here.

With the abandonment of trains as a mode of rail shipment in recent decades this facility has ceased to function. After standing empty for a number of years, this building and the nearby Railway Express Building were acquired from the Terminal by the City of Cincinnati for use as a regional bus service center. It was originally planned to convert this building into a bus repair facility but the costs involved in such a transformation proved to be prohibitive so a new facility for buses was built to the north and this building has continued to remain empty. Under its ownership by the city the Mail Handling Building has been allowed to deteriorate to the point where it is beyond economic salvage and re-use. Sale of the property to the United States Postal Service is planned and the building will be demolished to make way for a parking lot for employees of the adjacent post office.

## PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

### A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: Built as part of the Cincinnati Union Terminal complex, the Mail Handling Building is part of an outstanding grouping of Art Deco style buildings whose centerpiece, the passenger terminal, is a unique and powerful statement on American public architecture after Neoclassicism. It achieved its grandeur not through familiar details but in a strong and clear form which dominates its surroundings. The Mail Handling Building, while a lesser element in the whole composition, nonetheless relates stylistically with the entire complex and is physically within sight of the powerful dome of the passenger terminal.
2. Condition of the fabric: The building is in an advanced state of deterioration. While its exterior walls and framework all still stand, its roof, large areas of its windows, and all parts of its original

operating equipment have vanished.

B. Description of the Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The building is almost a perfect square, measuring 176 by 172 feet. It has small projections on the north and south side.
2. Foundation: The building rests on an exposed foundation of poured concrete. The concrete has been formed by molds into a smooth masonry surface.
3. Wall construction: Exterior walls are about one foot thick and are faced with hard-fired buff brick. The building's mortar joints are about 3/16 inches in thickness.
4. Structural system: The building's structure is reinforced concrete. Large mushroom columns on the ground floor support the main floor, which is formed with reinforced concrete. The walls are load-bearing masonry and the roof is supported by a series of steel I-beams.
5. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and doors: The building has small doors on the north, south and east sides. These are inconspicuous features and have no ornamentation.
  - b. Windows: Large rectangular window openings appear on all four sides of the building. These openings have metal frames which open outward as awning windows. Parts of the large windows on the north and south sides are fixed.
6. Roof:
  - a. Shape, covering: The roof is flat and originally had a composition membrane on a wood deck supported by the steel framework. However, the roof has greatly deteriorated and only portions are still intact.
  - b. Monitors: The building's roof has a clerestory area in its center which extends to the center of each of the four sides. This area houses some small offices on the east and west sides and is open on the north and south sides. The monitors or clerestories have flat composition roofs.

C. Description of the Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. Ground floor: This is a large open space with platforms constructed upon the concrete floor which appears to rest on grade. This level is punctuated by large round concrete columns with mushroom capitals.
- b. Main level: This vast open space has taller ceilings in the center of the north and south sections. It is one large open space with steel columns supporting the roof spaced at regular intervals. Remnants of platforms may be observed.
- c. Clerestory: This small area has offices on the east and west wings, but is largely open to the main level below. Windows on both sides of this section admit an abundance of light.

2. Stairways: These are located in niches in the north and south walls and are very small utilitarian structures made of metal with plain metal railings. They are walled off from the main interior spaces.
3. Flooring: This is exposed concrete throughout the building.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: These are all exposed masonry surfaces, except that the underside of the roof, where intact, features wood planking.

D. Site:

1. General orientation and setting: The building generally is oriented to the points of the compass but is shifted slightly so that the north side faces north-northwest. It stands in an industrial setting completely obscured from public view behind the larger post office building, which fronts onto Dalton Street.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- A. Early views: These were obtained from the dedication brochure, listed below in the bibliography.

B. Bibliography:

1. Primary and unpublished sources:
  - a. Anonymous, The Cincinnati Union Terminal Pictorial History, Cincinnati Chamber of Commerce, 1933; reprint by the Cincinnati Historical Society, 1987.
  - b. Newsclipping file on the Cincinnati Union Terminal at the Cincinnati Historical Society (included with this report)
2. Secondary sources:
  - a. Gray, Oscar S., "The Cincinnati Union Terminal Takes Shape", Cooperative Engineer, June 1932, page 15.
  - b. Anonymous, "Cincinnati Union Terminal", Survey Graphic, May 1930, vol. 25, pages 312-314.
  - c. The American Heritage of the '20's and '30's, Edited by Ralph K. Andrist, New York, 1970.
  - d. Bleekman, John E., The Cincinnati Union Depot and Terminal Co., Cincinnati, Ohio, March 15, 1911.
  - e. Wittkamper, D., Cincinnati Union Terminal, Cincinnati, 1970.
  - f. Hillier, Bevis, The World of Art Deco, A catalog from the Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1971.
- C. Supplemental material: A copy of a newspaper on the Cincinnati Union Terminal Mail Handling Building, which describes its operation and has some historical photographs of the building, is attached to this report. The original is in the Cincinnati Historical Society newsclipping file under the heading "Cincinnati Union Terminal" and is undated.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

The project consists of the demolition of the Cincinnati Union Terminal Mail Handling Building and the transformation of its site into a parking lot. This project is being undertaken by the United States Postal Service, which owns

adjoining property as part of its regional mail handling facility. The building is currently unoccupied and is deteriorated, posing a hazard. Attempts at finding a productive new use for the Mail Handling Building have been unsuccessful. This process has been hampered by the unusual layout of the building which precludes many other uses, by its location away from any public street and without any good access to the public except through private areas owned by the Postal Service or the City of Cincinnati, its rather unattractive location in an industrial area adjacent to busy freight railroad tracks, and finally because of the building's greatly deteriorated condition. The Postal Service will undertake the careful removal of the building from the site, the safe disposal of asbestos, and the grading of the site and its improvement into a private parking facility for Postal Service employees.

Prepared by: Steven McQuillin  
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Affiliation: Steven McQuillin & Associates  
Date: November 1, 1988

FIGURE #1- HISTORIC NEWSPAPER ARTICLE ON THE OPERATION OF THE MAIL HANDLING BUILDING (from Cincinnati Historical Society newsclipping file, undated)

Two of the most important units of Cincinnati's new Union Terminal are the mail and express buildings and their appurtenances. Improvements in the mail service will be felt throughout the Cincinnati district when the mail building is in operation. This district comprises parts of Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky, Tennessee, West Virginia, Virginia and North Carolina.

Benefits of the improved express service will be equally widespread. Many express accounting offices from other cities are to be moved into the new express building, including the large Indianapolis accounting office. Every facility for handling express, including special facilities for handling shipments of money to and from the banks is provided.

The mail and express buildings, their tracks, platforms, conveyors and concourses occupy a large area 1,200 feet north of the Union Station platforms between Liberty and Bank streets.

Many problems confronted J. B. Sullivan, assistant engineer, and Edgar D. Tyler, architect, for these two units of the terminal when they were assigned to prepare the plans. Cincinnati's mail service was scattered about the city. There were four principal transfer stations in addition to work done at the Post-office on Government Square. The express companies were required to do business at four different railway stations. Both great adjuncts of the business of this district have been combined into two compact and efficient units which postal, railway and express officials agree will not only be a large economy, but will speed up deliveries and furnish an incentive to reviving business everywhere.

Before parcel post service was instituted, loading and unloading of mail was a minor problem to the railroads. At way stations a fast express did not even stop as it snatched the mail bag from the rack where it was suspended at the side of the tracks. Arriving at a terminal the amount of mail, small in volume, was generally handled onto trucks at the passenger station platforms. Today nearly every passenger train carries mail by the carload and some trains have as many as ten or twelve solid mail

cars. To unload these cars at the station would require too much time and would take up space necessary for handling passenger cars.

#### SORTING THE MAIL

When a train arrives at the new Union Station the mail cars will be quickly transferred to one of the eight tracks adjoining the mail building. There are four outbound tracks and four inbound tracks with covered trucking platforms adjacent

to each. Between each pair of inbound tracks are two conveyors.

Approximately 40 per cent of the inbound mail is delivered to the "railway mail" section of the post-office where it is sorted and re-sacked and sent back to the railroad as outbound mail. This mail is placed on one of the two conveyors adjacent to the inbound tracks and is carried direct to the post-office. The remaining 60 per cent of the inbound mail, consisting of the transfer mail (50 per cent) and the City of Cincinnati mail (10 per cent), is placed on the other conveyor and is carried to the "Crow's Nest," where it is separated, the transfer mail going to the four outbound sorting platforms and the city mail going on another conveyor to the city section of the post-office. The "Crow's Nest" is the primary separating platform and is on the third floor of the mail building. It is here that the outbound mail dispatched from the post-office is also received and sorted along with the transfer mail.

Around the outbound platforms, mail trucks are parked, each labeled with the name of a city or railway mail route. The mail sorters, men working on these platforms, place the mail sacks on the proper truck. When the trucks are loaded the mail is removed to the proper mail car waiting on the outbound tracks.

It is possible to maintain a maximum of ninety-six separations, as each of the four platforms is arranged to accommodate twenty-four trucks on the second floor of the mail building. "Outsides" or mail that can not be placed in mail bags because of its bulkiness, is handled in the space provided around the four separating platforms.

Outbound mail comes from the U. S. post-office on conveyors and trucks, but loading of outbound

mail cars does not stop when the cars leave the mail handling building. Thirty-five minutes before train time these cars are transferred to the station. The mail handling building continues to feed them mail through a covered concourse, 1,200 feet long, leading direct to the station platforms. The last sack may be loaded just as the train pulls out.

#### SOLVING A PROBLEM

The separation of inbound mail onto two conveyors at the car created a difficult problem at the new terminal. The problem was to provide two conveyors between two tracks so that mail could be placed on either conveyor from cars on either track without "spotting" the cars. The system, which was devised by Mr. Sullivan, consists of a steel conveyor support and platform with a system of steel plate slides serving both conveyors from both tracks, so that anywhere the car

stops a cover plate may be removed and the mail unloaded and separated onto two conveyors at the car door.

The mail-handling building is a compact structure of steel, concrete and brick, 173 feet by 188 feet. It was designed by Architect Tyler. In the basement there are locker rooms, toilet facilities, and a storage space for mail trucks, where 150 trucks will be kept in reserve for handling the Christmas mail. Quarters are provided for platform men, a battery repair room and a tool department, as mail cars are repaired and serviced as they are being loaded or unloaded.

On the first floor there will be offices for railway mail clerks, and other officials necessary to mail operations. The mail building is connected with the U. S. Railway Post-office by two bridges. One is for the conveyors used in handling and receiving mail, the other for trucks and pedestrians.

Tracks for the express building, located 400 feet north of the mail building, adjoin the tracks for the mail cars. All platforms between tracks are covered with modern canopies.

#### FROM MANY TO ONE

Before designing the mail handling facilities, studies were made in the Third street parcel post terminal, the old C. H. & D. Railway

## Historic Newspaper Article on the Mail Handling Building (continued)

Station at Sixth and Baymiller streets, now used only for receipt of mail and express; the C. & O. Station on Fourth street; the Central Union Station and the Pennsylvania Station, where mail operations are now carried on. All of these operations will be combined at the Mail Building.

The express building is 740 feet long and 70 feet wide. It will house both the Railway Express Agency, Inc., and the Southeastern Express Company. It is of brick, concrete and steel, with two ornamental entrances, opening on the wide concrete road which marks the eastern boundary of the terminal property at this point. This road, which connects Bank street with Liberty street, was built by the terminal company to solve the traffic problem at the Mail and Express Buildings.

Architect Tyler has designed the first floor to be used exclusively for handling inbound and outbound express. Express may be delivered by the shipper directly to this building. There are special safety arrangements for handling valuable or highly insured express.

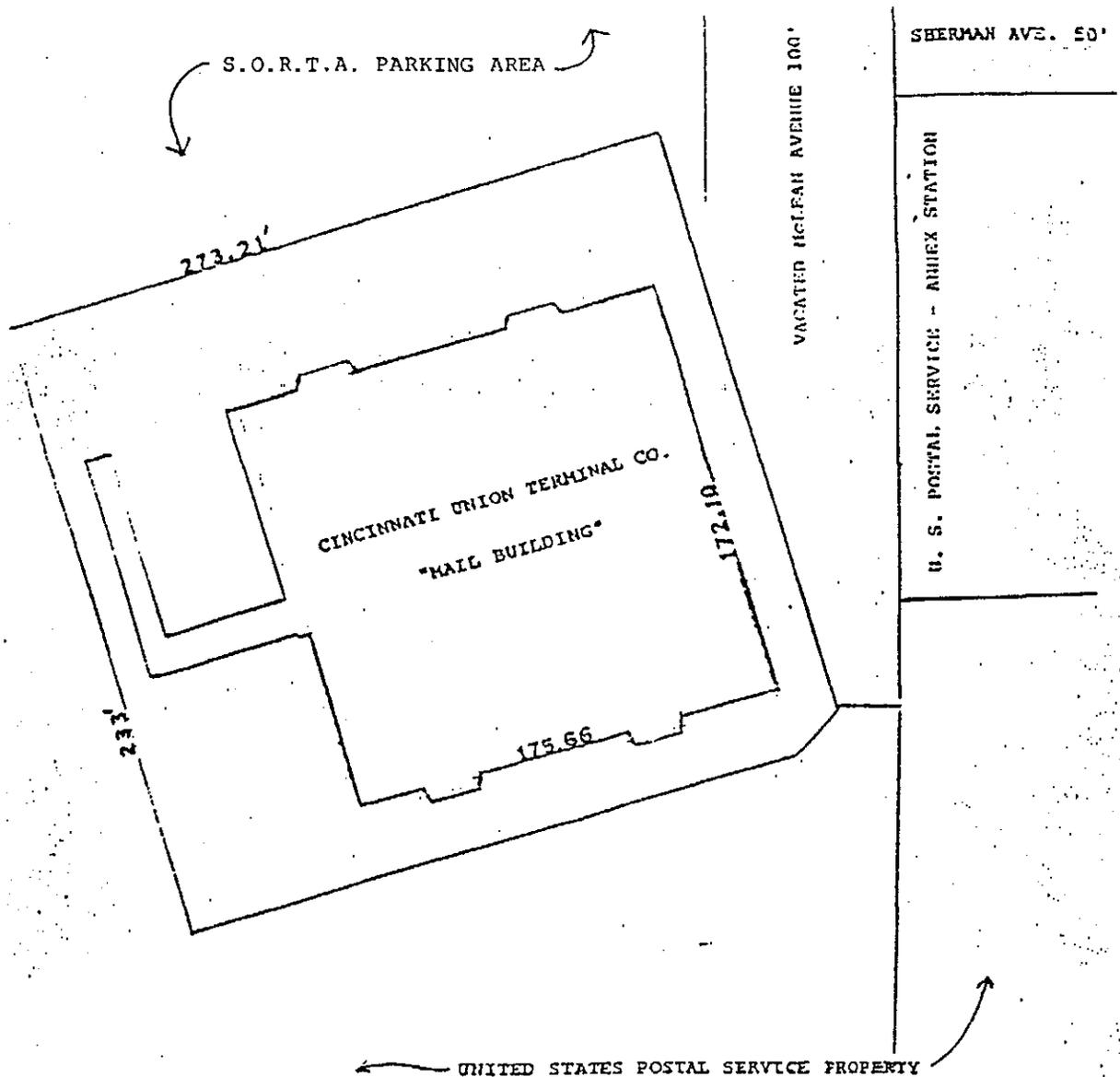
On the second floor more than 45,000 square feet of modern office space has been provided. Special offices for express officials, traffic supervisors and the large accounting forces necessary to handle this business have been provided with all of the latest office conveniences. Each express company will maintain a specie room. In this room all

the gold, silver and currency shipped to and from banks in this district will be handled. Every possible safety device has been provided for these rooms. Each room is said to be burglar-proof. The express messenger is locked in a special enclosure which no one can enter until he has delivered his money shipment. Each company will maintain a chief of police and guards, with offices convenient to the specie rooms.

Outside the express building there are fourteen tracks with covered trucking platforms adjacent, on which 100 express cars may be placed without over-crowding. Special provisions are made for handling theatrical baggage expeditiously. Both the architecture and the engineering of the terminal's mail and express building have been commended by experts throughout the country.

Everything will be in readiness for operation in these two buildings on March 31, when it is planned to open the terminal. The contractor for the U. S. railway post-office is having a difficult race with time in order to fulfill the contract, which provides that the post-office must have at least a receiving room completed by April 1.

FIGURE #2- SITE MAP OF THE MAIL HANDLING BUILDING



PLOT PLAN  
CINCINNATI UNION TERMINAL COMPANY - MAIL BUILDING

NOT TO SCALE!! Land dimensions estimated pending survey.

FIGURE #3- SKETCH PLANS OF THE BUILDING

